

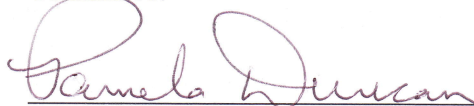
JUDACULLA: A NOVEL

By

Nancy Suzanne Raether

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Western Carolina University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Committee:




Pamela Duncan

Director



Deidre Elliott



Dr. Mary Adams, PhD

Dr. Scott Higgins, EdD

Dean of the Graduate School

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A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
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Nancy Suzanne Raether

Director: Pamela Duncan Associate Professor of English English Department
Committee Members: Deidre Elliott, English Dr. Mary Adams, English

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ABSTRACT

Judaculla is the coming-of-age story of Tim Fletcher, his recently discovered family, and their interaction with a mystical realm called the Land. Under threat from both a vengeful Cherokee Totem named Spider and the soul-sucking Shivers, Tim and his family must learn to navigate and preserve the Land. In order to save the Land, Tim must learn he is Judaculla, the mythical Cherokee “slant-eyed giant,” and fight back against the forces seeking to destroy the Land. Based on Cherokee folklore and Appalachian history, Judaculla is a magical realism work of Southern Gothic literature.

They made a statue of us
And put it on a mountain top
Now tourists come and stare at us
Blow bubbles with their gum
Take photographs, have fun
Have fun

Us, Regina Spektor

INTRODUCTION

Writing Judaculla started and ended at Judaculla Rock. I first visited the Western North Carolina landmark in the fall of 2009 and the rock and surrounding area enchanted me. Located off of Caney Fork Rd. in the Little Canada Community, Judaculla Rock is one of the oldest petroglyphs in the United States. Nestled next to private land, far off the beaten path, Judaculla Rock physically looks both mysterious and plain. When I first visited it, informative billboards surrounded the rock and presented conflicting theories for its existence. I noticed that both archaeological and mythological explanations were presented in the same light. Both explanations were given the same weight, which I found captivating.

The rock and its mythology and history sparked my imagination and I started researching it shortly after my initial visit. Throughout the fall of 2009 and spring of 2010, I researched the rock's history, mythology and the local area. Interestingly, I learned that there is no official "correct" story detailing Judaculla Rock's purpose. Historical and mythological explanations are equally accepted and debated. According to history, the rock pre-dates the Cherokee population and may have been used as a gathering point for other Native American tribes from Northern Georgia. However, according to Cherokee legend, the rock belongs to Judaculla, the slant-eyed giant. The rock was created when Judaculla jumped down from the ridges and chased hunters off of his land. When he landed, he slipped, and as he caught himself his claws scraped the marks into the rock as a warning to future hunters.

The foremost authority on Judaculla and WNC Cherokee mythology is James Mooney and in his *History, Myths and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee*, both mundane and mystical histories are presented. From his seminal work, I learned that the Cherokee myths mix with history to create a living cultural performance where members interact with spiritual aspects of their community.

In addition to conflicting theories about the rock, I discovered the rock is a local political hot button. Less than savory blood exists between Jackson County, the Qualla (Cherokee) Boundary, and Western Carolina University because of the rock and preservation efforts. After the county bought Judaculla Rock, various measures were taken to preserve it and its petroglyphs. However, many of the attempts were unsuccessful and damaged the rock. Due to the damage and the perceived misappropriation of a Cherokee landmark, the Qualla Boundary traditionally avoids contact with county or university regarding Judaculla or its mythology. This means that outsiders or non-natives have conducted most of Judaculla Rock's research and preservation efforts. Relations between the county, reservation, and university are improving, but efforts are slow.

Judaculla Rock's history and even more powerful mystery led me to imagine what it would be like if the myths regarding Judaculla Rock were true. I wondered what if Judaculla existed and interacted with daily, modern life. What if both the history and the myth were true? This idea of history and mythology co-existing came naturally to me due to my upbringing. I grew up in and around New Orleans and was raised practicing Voodoo and Santeria. In both of those practices, mythology is an active, vibrant part of everyday life. Talking with ancestors or Orisha is common and expected; it's as natural

as cooking or planting flowers. Thinking about my own experiences and upbringing, I wondered how that mindset could be applied to Appalachian folklore, specifically the legends of Judaculla.

At the same time, I became enchanted by the idea of what it would be like to be a small town prostitute. Through friends, I'd heard rumor that there is a prostitute in the Cullowhee/Sylva area. I heard several stories about her, what she looked like, and how her business appeared to run. Then, one day on my way back to campus from visiting Judaculla Rock, I saw the woman my friends described hitchhiking on Hwy 107. She had a busted knee and leaned on crutches; she looked like she was in honest need. So, I picked her up and brought her into Sylva. As we chatted, I learned that her name is Crystal and that she recently separated from the son of the Jackson County sheriff. When I dropped her off, I reflected on what it could possibly be like to be the ex-wife of the sheriff's son while having to resort to prostitution to make ends meet. Her life fascinated me as much as Judaculla Rock did.

However, I knew that trying to represent her life fairly was beyond my ability. I have no experience to draw from that's comparable to Crystal's. Thankfully, I've never been that desperate and I did not want to insult the reality of her situation by inadequately representing it. So, I realized that I needed to rely on pure fantasy to tell my prostitute character's story and not insult individuals with no option for employment outside the sex trade.

Initially, I wanted to combine Judaculla Rock and the Cullowhee prostitute in a novel-in-stories format. As I drafted over the summer of 2010, the novel-in-stories format

worked at first, but then fell short. The more I drafted, the more a definite novel-length plot developed. Working with a series of short stories was limiting and I realized that I needed to flesh out a book-length manuscript in order to tell the full story.

Through the fall of 2010, I went back to the drawing board and created/outlined a book-length plot. I did further research about Judaculla Rock and Jackson County. This time, I focused more on the physical attributes of the landscape and worked on creating the concept and layout of “the Land” in relation to actual Cullowhee/county landmarks. I also fully developed my main characters and fleshed out their histories and relationships to each other. Some characters from the previous novel-in-stories format shifted easily into the longer work, while others fell by the wayside.

Then, in the spring of 2011, I drafted the book-length manuscript. I submitted roughly a chapter a week for revision for the first few weeks and then submitted chunks of chapters at a time. Writing the chapters in chunks turned out to be easier for both my schedule and writing style. During revision, I edited the twelve chapters in four three-chapter chunks. I found this helped me keep momentum and consistency and it is a tactic I will use with my next book-length work.

The entire process was very much one of layering. As annoying as it was to realize that I needed to scrap a good bit of work and start over with a book-length plot, that process was extremely helpful. Getting to know Judaculla, Tim, Leeney, and Mabel first as characters in short stories allowed me to create them while focusing on specific details/traits. Buck and Tosk came along as I fleshed out the book-length plot and I was not able to focus on as much detail with them. In the future, I think I will draft a couple of

short stories about all my characters so that I am able to focus keenly on their development.

Due to my story's reliance on Appalachian folklore, mystery, and other noir elements, I feel it should be considered critically as a Southern Gothic work. Both the physical region of Cullowhee/Jackson County and the mythological world of Judaculla exist in Southern Appalachian history and folklore. Viewing Judaculla as a Southern Gothic work places it not only in regional but also in thematic context. I feel that Flannery O'Connor and Poppy Z. Brite influenced this work the most of the Southern Gothic writers I've experienced. O'Connor's short stories' engaging and honest dialogue along with her examinations of human nature shaped a lot of my characters' interactions. Brite's fresh language, intense supernatural plot lines, and focus on regional (Southern Louisiana) literature inspired me to incorporate similar elements.

In addition to being a work of Southern Gothic literature, I feel that Judaculla is also a work of magical realism. From the beginning, this story reinforces the concept that landscape is both magical and realistic. The other magical realism authors I feel my work is most similar to are: Neil Gaiman, Francesca Lia Block, and China Meiville. As magical realists, they all take the line between magic and reality and weave a liminal space with it in which their stories exist. Specifically, Gaiman's *American Gods* and Meiville's *Un Lun Dun* taught me how to balance a magical reality within a regular, mundane reality. In both of these works, the main characters must navigate magical realms that are deeply rooted in and influence everyday reality. Block's entire *Weetzie Bat* series taught me how to describe magic as something that is real. Her lush language and delicate points of view showed me how to incorporate the fantastical without making

it sound like pure fluff. I also feel that this group of modern magical realists represents the generation of writers with whom I identify.

The other author who influenced Judaculla was Ron Rash. I studied Rash's *Chemistry and Other Stories* to learn the Appalachian sound. I am not originally from Appalachia and so I wanted to study the voice of a native author to make sure my voice and my character's voices sounded distinctly Appalachian. Because so much of Judaculla is rooted in Appalachian folklore, history, and landmarks, I wanted the book's voice to reflect its area of origin. Blending the rugged poetry of the Old South sound with the vibrancy and pace of the New South voice allowed me to create a work that is both traditional and contemporary sounding.

Similarly, combining the past and present is a recurring theme in Judaculla. The main character, Tim Fletcher, must come to terms with life before and after learning about magic and his role in "the Land." In conjunction with this theme, I explore the definitions and boundaries of family and love. All of the major characters exist as a family unit, but only two of them are related. As Tim becomes a part of his new family, he comes to accept both a love and responsibility he hasn't experienced before. It is through his acceptance and family love that he is able to grow as a character and drive the story line.

However, the central theme of Judaculla is the importance of an inner personal space- a "land" that's inside all of us that comprises a more potent, bombastic reality than the everyday landscape. In Judaculla, Tim has to learn to navigate the magical "Land" and as he does he is better able to navigate everyday life. Tim begins uncomfortable in

his own body, but as he progresses through “the Land” and learns to navigate it with his new family, he becomes comfortable with who he is. By learning and conquering “the Land’s” challenges, he grows strong enough to feel safe in his world and who he is.

Reflecting on the current draft, I feel that while it is strong, it requires another round of revision before being suitable for publication. I work in layers and I feel that Judaculla needs one more layer of description in order for my readers to fully appreciate both the natural and supernatural landscapes/characters. However, I do feel that this draft is solid in terms of voice and narrative authority.

Moreover, I feel that I have written a marketable story. Judaculla has elements of horror, romance, fantasy, and Southern literature, so it appeals to a wide audience. The only other fiction book that includes Judaculla Rock is Noody Hooper and the Judaculla Rock, which is strictly a children’s story. Also, Judaculla revolves around a real, yet esoteric landmark and place, which can help marketing. Lastly, it’s a story about coming into one’s own, so it is suitable for college age as well as adult readers.

With publication, however, could come controversy. Utilizing Judaculla’s myth, along with other Cherokee myths and folklore, could be viewed negatively by the Cherokee community, given the region’s contextual history and because I am not a member of the Cherokee community. My thesis directors warned me that I may have to defend my decision to incorporate Cherokee folklore as a non-native storyteller. To this, I can only say that my intent was not to tell a Cherokee story, but a universal story. While I do incorporate Cherokee mythology, I do not attempt to shape the story from a Cherokee point of view. My story focuses on non-native reactions/interpretations of ancient myth.

Moreover, as a storyteller it is my job to tell the story that is in me to tell- the story that fascinates me. So long as my work is written and presented in good faith, my subject matter is my artistic prerogative.

The weekend I finished Judaculla, I drove to the rock eager to see the progress made by the latest preservation efforts led by a private organization. The park was closed, but I could see from the road that along with preservation, the organization built a large boardwalk that surrounds and dwarfs the rock. The scene reminded me of the countless newspaper clippings of similar efforts to preserve and beautify Judaculla Rock for tourism. Each incarnation of the rock's park builds the legend's power and attempts to honor a piece of history we can't fully explain. Similarly, Judaculla is my attempt at honoring and bringing new life to the rock's mystery.

CHAPTER ONE: THAT SUMMER

The fisherman found the body face down in the Tuckasegee a couple miles north of campus. Fog stitched a quilt to hide its prize, but the river was too loud. The Tuck babbled like gossip and the fisherman followed its ripples until the sight hooked him mid-step. One hundred and eighty pounds of flesh beached on the far bank, like a broken toy tossed-out. The fisherman couldn't do anything; the boy was obviously dead. The Tuck just wanted someone to know.

How the Tuck got the body was no mystery. The same thing happened every summer. A group of drunks thought playing in the river was a good idea. One started acting an ass, the bedrocks tripped him and before anyone could do anything, the Tuck won.

However, Sheriff Buchanan didn't care. He blacked out in his cruiser the night before and woke up kind of drunk. He sipped gritty, free gas station coffee and smoked a stub he fished out the ashtray. His face was greasy from sleeping with the window down and his nose was still sore. He supervised from the cruiser's hood as Cullowhee Volunteer Fire and Rescue pulled the body to shore. Buchanan walked over as they jiggled the body into the bag.

"Y'all bringing him in?" Buchanan asked.

"Yeah. Sal's engine's still out. Waiting on the county."

"Of course he is," the Sheriff said.

That was Cullowhee, Buchanan thought: a dead kid riding in the back of an F-350 because the county was broke.

“You should see this,” the volunteer said, pulling back the bag’s flap. “None of the boys’ve ever seen anything like it.” On the kid’s right thigh, turgid green veins spread a web six-inches around two crusty punctures. The bite oozed blood and puss, alive and angry on dead grey skin. Chills ran up Buck’s spine and he looked away to the kid’s face.

“Damn,” Buck said- he knew the kid. He’d walked-in on the boy and Leeney in her trailer the night before.

Sheriff Buchanan walked away before any real conversation had to occur and stood at the river’s edge. The Tuck ran high, but bored. The water didn’t tug any branches or tempt a hawk to dive. Stray leaves stayed on the bank and even the silt was still. Buchanan peered long down the river, cast a good pose, and pulled out his cell phone.

After two rings, Leeney answered, “I’m not talking to you.”

“Good, maybe that means you’ll listen,” Buck said.

“Not likely.”

“Woman,” he reared, but exhaled and settled and said, “You need to get on over to your mamma’s. Let her know. Boomer’s dead.”

“What? When? How?”

“Last night in the Tuck. Get on over. She’ll want to know.”

“Why can’t you?” Leeney snarked.

“Cause I have to go tell a man I played flag football with that his son is dead. That good enough?” Buck spat and hung up. He knew it wasn’t fair to blame Leeney for Boomer drowning in the Tuck- but he wanted to.

The good sheriff found it hard to forgive a whore who went back on her word.

See, Boomer was a virgin, despite Cullowhee’s best efforts. He was attractive enough, if a little thick necked, and everybody liked him. He was a big boy who hung out rough and his daddy was Mr. Dean Taylor, of Taylor Buick/GMC. Calling Leeney was his idea.

It ate at his daddy that Boomer wasn’t a man. Boomer was obviously not excited about it either, given he was fixing to get married, but his father was insufferable. Mr. Taylor started pecking when Boomer turned sixteen; the same age Mr. Taylor was when he lost his virginity. “It’s time you know,” his daddy said sanctimoniously, like doing-it would let Boomer in on some Big Secret. Nothing came through for Boomer that year and Mr. Taylor did all he could in the ones after: set up dates for the boy, encouraged girlfriends to stay over, asked Boomer’s friends to help out. Bless the man’s heart he even invited over a clean, young gentleman he found on Craigslist.

Nothing.

Mr. Taylor thought Boomer’s fiancé Jayme would clear up the problem, but love alone could not solve this. Boomer said she wanted him anyway, but that wasn’t enough for Dean. The boy was twenty-six years old and his daddy worried a chill would settle in

Boomer for good. He couldn't let his boy walk down the aisle without knowing a woman, for Jayme's sake if nothing else. Leeney was the only recourse. So, Dean he called, set up the encounter and drove Boomer there himself, rebutting all argument with, "God dammit, boy, you're gonna quit being a virgin."

Boomer was helpless. The trailer in Leeney's back yard was sweltering and Boomer's white belly broiled in the humidity. He stood stock still before Leeney, who sat on the bed and sized him professionally.

"I can see why your daddy called me," Leeney said.

"Yes ma'am," Boomer replied, head down.

"It is a predicament."

"Yes ma'am."

The problem was simple: the boy's dick was too damn big. It was obscene. Unwieldy. It hung there like an ancient pine dangling a cliff. Other girls, Jayme included, talked like they'd love it but when faced with it balked. Eyes wide in horror they crossed legs reflexively, and Boomer knew they couldn't.

It hurt.

Now, Leeney's gorge wasn't particularly wide. Her calling didn't erode her preserve; that's not why Mr. Taylor phoned the Parkers. He figured Leeney was the only one with a shot. She was more patient than any girl Boomer had tried with and didn't have the same things to lose.

Leeney felt how it all pained Boomer and it was her sensitivity more than his daddy's promise of a new used car that sold her. She usually never took virgins as clients, regardless how much was offered. "That's not how that's meant to happen. You'll regret it," she told them, but Boomer's case was different. It wasn't his fault he wasn't a man yet. God made Boomer the way he was, same as He made Leeney to help.

"I think you better lie back," Leeney said.

"Yes ma'am," Boomer replied and moved onto the bed.

"Has anyone ever done anything?" she asked, eyebrow cocked.

"Yes ma'am; me and Jayme do what we can."

"Well that's good." Leeney pulled up close to him. "Just relax."

Boomer closed his eyes as her fingers brushed flesh. He feared he wouldn't be able to perform, but in her hands a man dead three weeks could come alive. She kissed him everywhere and Boomer hit the stars. He blushed and said sorry and offered to get a towel, but Leeney said stay. She took off her things and wiped him and then gathered herself up on top and Boomer didn't dare breathe. Fear set rigor in his belly and he braced for the inevitable nothing.

Leeney Parker was everything, though, she was warm and slow and smooth and calm. Every inch of her was kindness and her high ridges and open valleys mesmerized. He gasped for breath as he met her and fierce air rushed in, setting goose bumps on his tongue. He tasted the woods seeped in through tin can trailer walls and the flavor flew to his head intoxicating, burning. He exhaled the limbs and leaves of every tree and inhaled

for more and each breath took him further into oak and pine and ash. Pale skin turned vibrant red in patches, Boomer's blood blooming and falling. Stump hands grasped thighs and turned Leeney over to lay roots. He felt lush soil take and guide, grounding. They swayed and bent and Boomer believed. He planted his knees and Leeney showed him spring.

Just as Boomer got his bearings, Leeney heard the trailer door open. She didn't think much of it; her mama said she might bring over tomatoes for Boomer to give to his daddy. But when official boots clunked across the trailer floor, Leeney knew it wasn't her mama, and tried to roll Boomer up off her, but was too late. The sheriff snatched Boomer by the scruff of his red neck and wrenched him out of Leeney. Buck shoved the boy forward and Boomer smashed into an ugly Tiffany butterfly lamp. As the sheriff bent down to heave Boomer up, Leeney kneed Buck in the head and he fell back against Irene's old chest of drawers.

"You shit ass!" Leeney screamed, tits flapping in fury. She jumped off the bed as he stood up and she jabbed him in the face. Buck's head snapped back and blood spurted out his nose. Leeney spat, "That was Grandma Parker's lamp!"

Boomer reached for his pants, but Leeney spun around and hissed, "You stay there, boy, I ain't done with you yet."

Leeney turned back around and grabbed the sheriff and shuffled him to the trailer door. Through curses, Leeney smelled Seagram's on Buck's breath, and she twisted his arm around the small of his back and yanked up. "You stay the hell out," she hollered, kicking him down the trailer stoop. "This ain't about you."

Buck stumbled back around and said flat, “No, it ain’t.” He wiped his busted nose and spat blood. “It’s about how you’re too big a pussy to meet your own boy.”

Leeney Parker stood, naked as an acorn, and stared down at the sheriff. The wind whipped up Buck’s back and the trees moaned like a lost calf in the rain. Stars glinted like tiny cleaver tips.

Buck looked around and smirked. “You think the mountains keep you safe, Leeney, but they don’t. I do.”

“That a threat?”

“Nope,” Buck replied. “Just a fact.” He walked off to his cruiser to Leeney barking, “You better run, you piss-ant, pig!”

Buck pulled out Leeney’s driveway and down Tilley Creek, and stopped at Cullowhee Mountain Road. His cell phone started ringing, but he chunked it in the back seat. He reached into the glove compartment for a couple of scratchy, yellow Wendy’s napkins, tore them up, and shoved the scraps up his nose.

“Shit,” the sheriff said and made his way to the airport. Jackson County’s airport was a thimble-sized death trap curled up on top of a lopped-off plateau. A paper airplane barely had room to land, but the airport had the best view for drinking and supervising the Christian township of Cullowhee below.

Buck pulled in to the six-slot parking lot and cut the engine. He checked his nose, popped the seat back, pulled out the half-empty fifth, and sipped himself numb.

Until the dispatcher's voice busted in the next morning, and the sheriff discovered the Tuck took Boomer.

CHAPTER TWO: NOTHING WENT RIGHT

Tim was lost. He'd been through this part of the Land before, but the Shivers were thick and he couldn't see the ridges. Smoke curled up on the peaks like sleeping snakes waiting for heat. Tim could tell they'd been through recently. Steam crept off black branches, shiny with ice, and the forest floor refused to thaw. Crystals hung in the fog and they cut his lungs when he breathed. He stood in the trees and listened. The River was near; he heard it rushing south, through the Valley, away from the Courthouse. If he sneaked toward the sound, he could find the way back north.

The Spider wasn't in sight, but that didn't mean she was gone. She could be crawling right behind him and there's no guarantee he'd know it. He still had to pass through the Valley, avoid the Shivers, and take back what was his.

Provided he could remember what he was meant to take back, or what he was supposed to do with it. And, standing in the freezing trees, he doubted he could remember. It's not like dreams have maps.

He knew there was no way he'd get through all of that without crossing the Spider, but he took whatever breaks he could. Tim took off through the woods to the River and just as he cleared the tree line and saw the bank dip, he got the creeps. They started small, right between the shoulder blades, prickling up and out until a cold dread crawled across his skin. He could feel them seeping and slashing from the peaks, searching for his heat.

He caught the Shivers' attention. His fear lurched and whined.

Every damn time, Tim thought, sprinting back into the trees. He just needed somewhere to hide, somewhere safe that they couldn't sense him, but after twelve years of these nightmares, he was beginning to wonder if safe existed.

He looked back to try to spot them, but as he did, his foot caught on log and he slammed into the ground. Tim shot up in bed, propelled out of the dream, and glazed with pain. It felt like he'd been smacked with a two-by-four.

Tim stumbled to the bathroom and leaned on the tiny dorm sink. He looked in the mirror and winced. Grey patches dulled his skin and clammy cheekbones protruded. Nightmares always made him puny. He washed his face and pulled his blonde hair.

His roommate Sean was still asleep. They were supposed to run six miles together that morning, but Tim didn't want to be around anyone, much less run with them. He hated running buddies. Normally, he just dealt with Coach's safety rules, but when the nightmares came, he couldn't. Being within one hundred feet of another person suffocated. He needed to go to the rock.

He was driving halfway down Old Cullowhee before Sean's alarm rang.

"Oh you best not send me to voice mail, you little shit-ass," Mabel said into her Droid and lit a clove cigarillo. "Dammit."

She hung up and snapped her cell around to text her daughter. "You ain't crying to me," she tapped and slammed it on the counter.

"Shit-ass," Mabel spat and took a drag.

She hadn't been this angry with Leeney since her daughter was little. However, she was being about as dumb as a seven-year-old, so Mabel felt justified. She couldn't believe Leeney was flat out ignoring her son. She raised Leeney better than that.

Mabel felt for Leeney, she did. She couldn't imagine how her daughter felt when she opened that letter two weeks ago. She couldn't imagine what it took for the boy to send it, either. But she did know that when Leeney gave up that baby for adoption he'd come back. She respected her daughter's decision, but she still thought the girl was an idiot.

"Parkers are different," Mabel said to Leeney twenty years ago. "We can't do like other people. You know what all that boy will carry in him."

"Yeah, I do. That's why he's better off being as far away from me as possible," Leeney rebutted.

"You're a damn fool," Mabel said aloud now like she did to Leeney then. "You're a God damn fool."

Mabel needed to calm down; she was supposed to watch her blood pressure, an idea that flipped her into a snit. "Never was a Parker who died from feeling," she told her doctor when he opened negotiations about medicine last year. "I'll just smoke my weed and listen to Jimi if I feel unduly riled. Besides, I'm an old hen now. I like it. Not much going on anymore to bother me, other than Leeney's bullshit."

And she was right; retirement suited Mabel Parker. Since her daughter took over the family business a while back, Mabel embraced freedom. She stayed pleasantly stoned

all day and drank expensive coffee and imported whisky. She kept a little garden that was more sunflowers than tomatoes and watched a reproachable amount of bad made-for-TV sci-fi movies. She played World of Warcraft fourteen hours a week, thanks to Tosk, and, in general, tried to stay out of the world's way.

Lord knows she deserved it, too. Taking care of Cullowhee was not easy. It demanded more unconditional love than most could muster. The Parkers were uniquely qualified for the charge due to their ancestry, and Mabel enjoyed the work, but she enjoyed retirement more.

Retired, she had more time to meddle, and meddling was Mabel's favorite thing to do.

About two miles in, Tim wasn't feeling as poorly as he expected. The dreams burned away and he sank into a lazy lope that would carry him the rest of the way to the rock and back to the river park- a useless run, training-wise, but he didn't care much about training. Coach would have a fit when he found out Tim ran off campus- especially if he discovered Tim went down Caney Fork. The road chased a creek plunged off the Tuckaseigee and was made of blind curves. He'd run all over Cullowhee and most of Webster and Sylva. Caney Fork was the only road that didn't bore him.

Truth be told, Tim was tired of running. He'd been racing since he was eleven, and at twenty years old he was done with it. Back at Smoky Mountain High School, he was the track team's pride and joy. State Champ, twice over, in the mile and two-mile, and he lead his cross-country team to three state trophies. He was courted by all the big

names: Louisiana State, UCLA, Oregon, and Rice. Even the Army wanted Tim to run. He had the fastest set of legs in all of North Carolina and could have written his ticket to anywhere, but didn't.

His heart wasn't in it anymore. He fell out of love with the race, so he disappointed everyone, stayed home, and signed onto Western's team to get a free ride. His parents were more than a little miffed; they had already gotten new jobs down state when Tim copped out. His mom was from Raleigh originally, and she wanted to move back closer to Tim's grandfather. His parents moved anyway and figured Tim would eventually get sick of Cullowhee and want to transfer to Chapel Hill. He was smart enough, and it was a good racing team, but Tim never changed his mind. They refused to let him live alone at the house and decided to rent it out and make him move into the dorms. After two years, it became abundantly clear that Tim had the will of a goat, and they decided to put the house on the market and stay in Raleigh for good.

Luckily, Tim didn't hate dorm life, but he did hate his room and teammate, Sean. Tim couldn't wait for him to move out. Sean was supposed to be in the Village at the beginning of the summer, but Western lost his room transfer request, again, and they were stuck together for another week. They were never the closest of friends, but in the last two weeks Sean rubbed every hair Tim had the wrong way. It wasn't just Sean, it was everyone Tim knew. From his teammates to his ex, Samantha, human beings set his teeth on edge. He couldn't even talk on the phone to his parents without wanting to punch a wall, and he missed his mom and dad.

He got like this when the nightmares stuck around. They came every so often, since he was a kid, and were always the same. He was stuck in the realm on a quest he couldn't remember, being chased by soul-sucking Shivers and a huge Spider, with no help or map or fucking clue. He never figured a pattern to them; the nightmares came on all of a sudden, like a flash flood breaking the bank. That wasn't the worst part of the dreams, though. The worst was how real they seemed, and how fake they made everything else. Tim's dreams were real like cancer is real- real like watching your lover walk out and never look back. The nightmares sucked the color out the sky, and even when Tim was awake, the nightmares were there, clutching his chest. Scratching. Burrowing.

Weaving.

But he wanted them. A sick little sliver of his soul wanted the nightmares- craved them. Awake, Tim was bored and lonely. He'd never found anyone who could hold all of the words in his chest. He felt wrong, like he didn't fit in his body and his body didn't fit into anything. It felt as if a thick, grainy fog rose between him and everything else, cutting him off. In the Land, he may have been hunted, but he felt substantial. Alive.

Real.

Tim veered left down a long drive marked with a green sign that read Judaculla Rock. He took a face full of spider web and grimaced.

At 23, Virginia Toskov was the youngest Coroner's Assistant Jackson County ever hired. She went by "Tosk" and she was good at what she did-which helped, because she was also the Interim Head Coroner and had just one part-time intern to help her put the county to rest. Tosk started working with the dead when she was 16, as a make-up artist, at Mauney's Funeral Home off Old Settlement Road. Mauney's had a good reputation of burying the right body in the right slot, which was saying something. Funeral homes made a decent chunk of cash triple-booking a plot. None of it was strictly legal, or even remotely ethical, but neither was Cullowhee.

Tosk was hired as the Assistant Coroner three years ago and loved what she did, and was thankful she had a place to do it, but even the clean satisfaction of a body well preserved couldn't lift her heart when they brought in Boomer from the Tuck.

"Buchanan said to call him when you're done," the Cullowhee Volunteer Fire and Rescue driver said as Tosk signed for the body.

"Fisherman found this one?" Tosk asked, scanning the paperwork.

"Yeah. Clive Henderson."

Quiet pushed between them, clutching the words in her throat.

"I guess some just have all the luck," the driver said.

Tosk looked at him like he'd sank a sack of puppies.

"Well, I'll let youins get to it," the driver mumbled and walked out.

"Ass hat," Tosk said behind him.

What pissed off Tim the most about the whole situation was that he never wanted to meet Leeney in the first place. He couldn't care less about meeting his birth mom. As far as he was concerned, she gave him away- that made the feeling mutual. He'd made his peace with it, and besides, he had a good life, good parents, and quite frankly, didn't want to fiddle with any of that.

Samantha did, though. Not that she stuck around to find out what she sowed. Samantha nagged at Tim to contact his birth family; she didn't think it was right he didn't know where he came from.

"I'm from Cullowhee, just like you," he remembered telling Samantha when she brought the whole thing up. She used her dad's notoriety as a judge to weasel Tim's adoption records out of the archives down state. She found out Leeney was Tim's birth mom and set to connecting the estranged mother and son. Tim was livid when he found out Samantha sent the whole Parker family letters, but when he sat at Bogart's and waited for Leeney to show up, and she never did, he saw red. He walked out of the restaurant as lava streamed in front of his eyes like the tears down his cheeks. He sat in his P.O.S. Ford Focus and balled twenty years worth of pent up anger he didn't know he had. He beat the dash and shook the wheel and screamed so loud a family across the parking lot turned to see what the racket was. Tim thought he'd forgiven Leeney for giving him away, but when he knew her name and still couldn't match it to her face, he realized he hadn't forgiven shit.

And probably never would. It didn't matter that he had it good; the woman who gave him life didn't want to know who he was. A big piece broke in him as he pulled out of Bogart's two weeks ago and nothing rose to fill its place.

Tim could see the rock despite the mist coming off the cow pasture. He watched the fog move and imagined he could jump the fence and run right through it and end up somewhere else entirely.

Somewhere without clingy ex-girlfriends, annoying roommates, and women who spat you into the world and didn't deign to care what happened next.

A sweet breeze kissed him and set goose bumps tingling up his bare calves. It chilled the fresh mud freckling wiry hair. Tim inhaled, closed his eyes, and let go.

Tosk looked at Boomer and knew something wasn't right. Boomer was bloated, blue, and silent. Most people think dead things are quiet, but that's not true at all. Death is loud, like a generator. It's everything else that quiets down, so much that death clangs.

Tosk didn't like how quiet Boomer was. She cut off his shorts and found two small black punctures surrounded by a web of grimy, sick veins. She cut off more clothes and saw the web crawled out to his chest and down his left hip. An itch twisted Tosk's calf, and she scratched it with her foot.

Tosk touched the veins with her gloved hand and felt sick like she'd eaten fry-bread and gotten on a Tilt-O-Whirl. She backed away and looked to make sure the door was locked. She slipped off her shoes and socks; the cheap linoleum chilled her feet and

helped ground her. Once she felt still, she placed her hand on Boomer's forehead and closed her eyes.

Tosk listened to the dark. She listened for what she couldn't see, for whatever didn't want to be heard. She reached into the silence, feeling for traces left behind by magic. She felt nothing, but pricked her ears harder and bit her bottom lip, willing the silence to speak.

A great big nothing answered back.

She removed her hand, settled back in her feet, and opened her eyes. She washed her hands, put back on her shoes, grabbed her Droid, and sent, "Coming home for lunch. Lots to Tell," to Mabel.

CHAPTER THREE: AND IT KEPT GETTING WORSE

Spider was hungry, not as hungry as the rest of the Totems- most of them hadn't fed in years. They all used to be full, but since Judaculla left and the Shivers reigned, food was scarce. The smoke froze the root and bud and Elk and Rabbit were soon famished. Squirrel and Blue Jay and Snake withered away and the Valley was hollow. Spider was still wary of Judaculla and didn't exactly want him back, but the Shivers smeared the sky and snuffed the fires. The only warmth came from Spider's tusti bowl, latched onto her back. She'd stolen the flame when the Valley was still young- even given fire to the other Totems. Of course, that's what ended her trapped in Judaculla's Courthouse to start.

To Judaculla, if a Totem couldn't make its own fire, it didn't deserve the heat.

The boy Spider caught this morning didn't sustain her as much as she thought he would. He was real big and real dumb, and normally big and dumb qualify as meaty finds: lots of flesh and no substantial thoughts to muck the flavor. However, he wasn't real- he had no magic. He couldn't last.

She perched up on the head of Caney Fork, deep in the Little Canada Community, way past where God forgot to finish. Little Canada was outside of Cullowhee and, like a few other places in the county, Little Canada was what the Parker women referred to as a soft spot: a place where two realities met but didn't stitch, so they bled into each other. She walked between the Land and Cullowhee through the soft spots and looped her web tight around Cullowhee.

She dug her prickly hairs hard into the ridge and churned pearly silk from her pit. Tiny spinners stretched the silk into steel strength thread, and Spider slowly wove a web between the worlds.

Tosk had just finished sewing up Boomer's body; other than the bite, there was nothing strange about the cause of death: inebriated idiot playing in the river. She pulled a white cloth over the boy's frame and wheeled him into the freezer, when her stomach snarled for lunch.

When she walked out to her car, Sheriff Buchanan was sitting on her hood, smoking a cigarette. He smelled like whisky and rot.

"I was just about to call you," Tosk lied.

"Yeah, you and baby Jesus."

"Well, a girl's gotta eat. You don't want your autopsy report all bungled by low blood sugar, do you?"

"Cut the shit," Buck spat. "I don't have any give-a-fuck today."

"Yeah, I heard about your brave bust-in last night. You must be tired," Tosk poked.

"Was that thing on Boomer," Buck paused, unsure which words to pick. "Was it... real?"

"Yup," Tosk said. "Really real. Spread, too. Chest and left hip."

“Damn,” Buck swore, and took off his hat.

“Yeah. Sucks to be his fiancé Jayme. I’m going home for lunch. You wanna come?” she tried again.

“You know, you’d think out of anyone, you’d show some respect for a kid found face down in the river,” Buck said. “After what happened and all.”

“Sheriff,” Tosk replied. “What happened to me is exactly why I have no respect.”

Buck snickered at the girl and put back on his hat. “You’re as bad as Leeney.”

“You going prowling, then?” Tosk asked.

“Have to, don’t I?” Buck replied.

“Yeah,” Tosk said. “Guess so.”

CHAPTER FOUR: UNTIL IT HIT ROCK BOTTOM

The lynx's claws clumped dirt clods as he walked the Land. Grime clung to his fur, browning a white star-shaped patch on his chest. Soil cranked and burrowed in his pads, working his paws like angry pearls. Usually he'd bother to cover his tracks when he prowled, but here lately it really didn't matter. The Shivers could track him anywhere. They could smell his heat.

The lynx knew better than to waste time fearing the Shivers, though; the realm was not new to him. The lynx was free to run the Valley, despite not being a Totem. He was a normal man in the everyday world, like the lady behind the counter of the Kel-Save. Regular. In the Land, though, he was a lynx. Most everybody looked different when they were in another world; they suddenly had wings or horns or frog skin, what have you. Though the lynx did know one anomaly that looked the same in every realm they entered, but they weren't the kind of person he wanted around right now. Evergreen souls tended to attract attention, which is exactly what he was trying to avoid.

The lynx knew what he was looking for: lines- little, lithe, silver lines strung like vines through space and time. He repeated that rhyme in his throat, where human words turned to snarl and hiss. He sensed for a while that something was on the hunt, but given the nature of Boomer's wound, he was pretty sure that meant Spider was loose. How in the world she got out of the Courthouse, the lynx didn't want to know. He just wanted her wrapped back up snug in that hole, and for whatever let her out to do the same thing.

And at that exact thought, the lynx knew where to go.

Tim stood on the little boardwalk that drew a crescent around Judaculla Rock. Post stumps held a circle of steel rope around the large stone cut with markings so old no one could make out. A crooked, hand painted sign hung from the steel rope read: Please Keep Off the Rock. Bamboo shoots encroached on two of the post stumps, but the grass didn't grow anywhere inside the circle. It looked like the rock had been there since before the ranges took names and Tim wished he had been alive then- back the land was wild and ridges ripped the sky, like starved mad men tearing through a whore for the first time.

Not like now: tame, retired. Mountains so old they owe no tithe.

Rainwater pooled in one of the rock's pocks and ripples bounced sun and stone, shimmering like tufts of diamond dust. Tim remembered the River in his dreams; it's one of the few places that seemed to like him. The first time he found the River, it was nice to him. It collected in a small stream between tree roots, cool and clear and easy to catch. As he rested on its bank, the River dropped for Tim to jump its stones and cross.

Tim was thirsty from the run, but only wanted the River to drink.

The River would take you up to the Courthouse or down to the Rock. The lynx figured Spider would have taken the easy route and looped her web at the Rock and when he sniffed the air and licked the soil, he knew Spider wasn't far.

Down in the Valley, across the field, under the oak, the Rock sat flat and fat. He peered past tall grass, where Cow and Deer grazed, and spied a flash of silk thread worried by the wind. He fixed his eyes on the silver wisp and wanted to pounce it, but

knew better. One touch was all it took. He crouched and small seeds pulled his coat, tugging as he stalked.

The lynx prowled through reeds, staying close to the grass. He could see more of the web now: three lines crossed the Valley and looped right at the Rock. The lynx paused and sniffed the soil; something else was nearby. Something besides the Valley and River and Rock, a scent besides the blood and smoke of the Shivers, besides the Spider's silk. It smelled familiar, but faint, like a butterfly bush past its bloom.

Except the scent wasn't sweet, it was clay and sweat and copper. The lynx's whiskers twitched.

Tim looked at the mountains leaning in on the valley. Judaculla Rock sat in the middle of a blue-ridge bowl. All around him rose gnarled emerald peaks that would burst into jasper come fall, and then give way to winter's snowflake obsidian. From this vantage, Tim saw the past two weeks hadn't been merely shitty. They'd been the worst Goddamn two weeks in his entire life. Screw his parents for selling the house, and screw Samantha and her I-need-a-real-man bullshit, like she'd know a real man if one pulled over and changed her tire.

And screw that dumb whore that gave me away, he thought with a real man's resolve. You can't count on a quitter to do right.

Tim jumped down from the boardwalk and was about to start the run back to his car, but one of the glyphs caught his eye. It looked like a handprint on top of a thin tall poll. He stepped over the steel rope, bent over, and lined up his hand on the glyph.

The second that Timothy Fletcher's hand touched Judaculla Rock, he hit the ground as if he'd been shot in the leg. A sharp shock shot up his arm, bursting across his body like fireworks. The shot fried his nerves and short-circuited his brain, and he fell down dead.

A spark shot around the Rock and the lynx ducked down lower, every inch of him slithering in the dirt. The light ran across Spider's lines, igniting the night to the fullness of her web. From the look of it, the lynx reckoned the Spider could leave the Valley, not just the Courthouse.

Light flicked, and the lynx prowled closer. Something was at the Rock; the lynx's hackles stirred up again and as he crawled a crack snapped and the Rock lit up like lightning. The lynx bolted for the Rock- something was breaking through from the other side.

The lynx picked up speed and screamed, ripping a hole in the Land with his teeth. He jumped through it and slid through the air into Cullowhee.

Buck slammed back into his body and pulled out of the park and ride on 107 before he could see straight. He flew around the curves and felt sick, but took the hard

left at Caney Fork and sped up. His heart burned and he hoped he could get to whoever fell through. He pulled up to Judaculla Rock and saw Tim lying next to the rock. Buck barely got the car in park before he leapt out. He ran barefoot down to Tim, yanked him up, and slung the boy over his shoulder.

He shut the backseat door, jumped in, and as he threw the cruiser in reverse, he cursed, “Dammit. Your mama’s gonna kill me.”

CHAPTER FIVE: AND SHATTERED

Sirens shrieked down Caney Fork and Buck whipped the wheel with white knuckles. It'd take at least ten minutes to get to Mabel's and that was pushing it, as far as Tim's safety was concerned. The sheriff had no clue when the boy was knocked out, but it took at least five minutes for Buck to land back in Cullowhee from prowling and reach Judaculla Rock. Five more minutes to heft Tim into the cruiser and make it back out to the stop sign at 107. Time passed different between realms; ten minutes in Cullowhee could equal ten years somewhere else. The longer Tim was knocked out here, the less of a chance they had to locate him in the Land. Eventually the boy would start wandering.

The sheriff pressed hard on the accelerator. A fat half moon loomed over the ridge and shone bright on the white and yellow highway lines. The ridges ate the moon and the sheriff took a black curve. Buck glanced at Tim in the back seat; the boy was still unconscious. Buck shook his head and swore- the last thing the sheriff's office needed was Cullowhee's own gone mysteriously catatonic. Of course Buck recognized Tim; there wasn't a person in Cullowhee, Sylva, or Webster that didn't recognize Smoky Mountain High's Tim Fletcher. When he signed onto Western, they'd plastered his face on a billboard above Bryson Farm Supply down from the high school. Tim graduated with a 4.0 GPA, a 4:07 mile, and looked like the sun rose just to see him smile. Damn near everyone knew Timothy Fletcher.

What Sheriff Buchanan didn't know was how the boy made it into the Land. Crossing over in a soft place was a seasoned veteran's adventure. Leeney was crappy at it, so a kid busting into another realm didn't make any sense to Buck. People walk through soft

places all the time and manage to stay on their side of the fence. The fabric of existence may be an old washrag, but it held. A rip like the one that sucked Tim through was a problem- a real ass-knot of a problem.

Sunlight streamed through the window in Leeney's garage and traced a sweet shadow under her breast. The white v-neck Fruit of the Loom t-shirt was sheer from years draping her chest. Denim cut-offs sprouted good, thick thighs- the kind of thighs that can stop a landslide. Strong, but smooth, like rocks weathered by the river's curves. Red cowboy boots rooted her stumps as she reached across the truck's hood.

She'd just finished changing Big Blue's oil and was wiping her down with Irene's grandpa's old rag. Irene had bought her all kinds of new rags and buffers, but they stayed fresh in their packages. Leeney heard Irene's voice in the back of her mind, "I don't know why you insist on using that old thing. I got you plenty new."

"Your grand daddy said to use this one, and I told him I would," Leeney replied. "You trying to make a liar out of me? Make that old bastard stalk me from the grave?"

Irene giggled and Leeney wished she could have bottled that woman's smile- her snaggle-teeth and haughty cheeks- there was nothing tougher or more beautiful to Leeney. The mountains seemed small and rusted in comparison, even after they moved Irene into hospice.

Leeney folded the rag and tossed it on the worktable. She opened the driver's door, sat down, and reached into the 1957 Chevy Apache's glove box for her dug out and

bat. Big Blue was fully restored and updated, complete with a CD player and baby blue leather seats. She clicked the engine on enough to listen to a little Queen and packed her bat. Leeney leaned back, propped up her left boot on Big Blue's open door, and inhaled.

Her ears pricked at the sound of a police siren wailing up the road.

"Damn, that sure smells good," Tosk said, putting her bag down and kicking off her shoes by the front door.

"She's a shit-ass," Mabel said as Tosk cleared the kitchen threshold. "I swear that girl is going to give me a stroke."

"Statistically speaking, she's more likely to give you a heart attack than she is a stroke," Tosk replied, picking a beer out of the fridge. "As a Southern woman over 65, your chances of heart disease are pretty high. Astronomical, even."

"She didn't meet him," Mabel continued, stirring a pot of gravy. "I cannot believe she told me she was going to go, avoided my ass for two weeks, and then let me find out through Nancy Granger, Samantha's hoity-toity grand-bitch, while I'm in line at Bob's."

"Why were you at Bob's? I thought he kicked you out for good after you slapped his niece?"

"That little tart had it coming after asking if I needed help carrying my cigars to the car," she ended taking another drag. "And that's not the point. The point is I'm gonna dig a grave. I hope you're ready to carry on the family tradition."

“Oh, no ma’am,” Tosk replied. “I am not under that curse. Maybe you can talk your new grandson into it.”

“Shit-ass.”

Mabel flicked off the burners and flung the gravy spoon into the sink. She stood by the counter, looked out the window while pulling on her cigar, and mumbled, “I raised her better than this.”

“You can’t blame the sun when the corn won’t grow,” Tosk said, and made a plate for Mabel. She fetched Mabel’s beer and sat her down at the table. “Besides, we got bigger problems than Leeney.”

“Yeah. She told me about Boomer. It’s a shame that little girl lost her man before the wedding.” Mabel surmised.

“It’s not just that,” Tosk replied, but before she could finish, blue lights flickered through the window, followed by the siren’s wail.

“It’s like he knows you made collards,” Tosk said.

“Collards ain’t an emergency, though,” Mabel replied. “Not even for Buck.”

She got up from the table and opened the door in time for Buck to swing in Tim, feet first, flopped over his arms. Mabel shut the door as Tosk came hollering, “What the hell, Buck?”

“He’s lost, Mabel. I was prowling and he ripped through. He ripped right through and fell on the Rock. He’s been out for at least twenty minutes,” the sheriff finished, lying Tim down on the living room sofa.

“Lost where?” Mabel said. “How’d you find him?”

“Holy shit, it’s Tim,” Tosk said, recognizing him from the billboard. She turned to Buck and snapped, “How did you find him?”

“Tim? Our Tim?” Mabel said and blanched. “But how? How’d you know it was him?” she asked them both.

“You really never leave this house, do you?” Tosk quipped.

“I don’t know how,” Buck snarled. “I told you what I know. I was out prowling and he ripped through at the Rock. I popped back on this side, picked him up at Judaculla, and ran here.”

“Ripped through? What do you mean ripped through?” Tosk snarked. “Reality doesn’t rip.”

Mabel stared down at her grandson and said, “Sometimes. It can.”

“How?” Tosk snipped, tossing her hands.

Mabel looked back at Tosk, the old woman’s eyes fierce and green as crabgrass. The air was loud with the sound of words crashing against the back of her teeth. Tosk’s lips tightened and she left to latch the open windows and lock the back door. Mabel turned back to her grandson.

“Do you need me here?” Buck asked Mabel.

“No. Go tell Leeney. But once you leave, we’ll shield so y’all can’t come back for a while.”

“Can you find him?”

Mabel looked back up at Buck and said, “No, but Tosk can. Lock the door when you leave.”

Tim came to and looked around; he was in the Land and had no idea how he got there. His head pounded and he felt woozy, like he’d sprinted a half-mile. The last thing he remembered was being in the forest, but nothing after that. He had never been to this part of the Land- but he knew where he was. Dreams were like that; some things you just knew. Things no one told you, but you knew as certain as you knew your name. He knew he was at the Rock, which meant he was in the Valley and past the Shivers. Not far off, he saw the Waterfall sighing. His heart ping-ponged, he finally made it but still had no idea what he was supposed to do. He’d hoped he’d know or remember or whatever when he got to the Rock, but he was wrong.

He didn’t know anymore than he already did, though: he had to survive the Land and take back what was his. The River helps. The Shivers will freeze your blood and seize your mind. The Spider took the fire. She bites.

Oh shit- Spider, Tim thought, and ducked. He glanced up and exhaled to see a silver string above the Rock. It hypnotized him, like watching clouds ripple over ridges.

He stood and tilted his head, transfixed. The silk slithered in the air, and Tim had to touch it.

He toed up the giant Rock face, eyes fixed on Spider's web.

The cruiser's lights pierced Leeney's eyes and she put her hand up to block the intrusion. Buck cut the engine and Leeney re-packed her bat and took a hit. She blew a tuft at his face as he approached Big Blue's open door.

"What you making all that noise on my mountain for?" Leeney asked.

Buck shoved her over into the passenger seat and took a kick to the hip for the transgression. He shut the door, rolled up the window, and punched off the CD player. He grabbed the bat out of her hands and said, "For once in your life, woman, mind."

Leeney settled back at an angle in the crook of the passenger seat, thighs spilling out like hot springs. She quirked her lips, ran long fingers through sun kissed hair, and watched Buck smoke. She looked down her driveway, past his cruiser into the tunnel of leaves. The trees glittered with dew too lazy to melt.

"I'm gonna tell you a little story and then I'm taking you down to the house. Tim's there and he'll need to see you," the sheriff finally spoke.

Leeney reared back and cocked her neck to tear into Buck, but as soon as she opened her mouth, his stare cut her off. "You really want to shut your trap and listen," Buck growled, like a cat before the pounce.

She chewed her cheek like cud and spat, "Fine."

He packed another bat and handed it to Leeney. If nothing else, the sheriff was civilized.

"You think he's still at the Rock?" Tosk asked, gently picking up Tim's head and settling herself so he could lie in her lap.

"No, but it's a place to start," Mabel replied, pulling an old afghan over Tim's legs despite the stuffy summer heat.

Tosk stared at Tim, she could trace Leeney in his chin and around his eyes. His skin had a runner's tan, warm against the pale of her coroner's hand. He didn't look like he did on the billboard, up close like this. He ran across the billboard tall and long, stretched out like a giant making hills with heel strikes. But here, he slumped over her lap like a soggy leaf. Her heart turned inside her ribs; she shouldn't think he was beautiful.

"Tosk?" Mabel asked. She was sitting, Indian-style, on a leopard print pillow on the floor. Her hibiscus moo-moo fluffed out around her knees and she looked like a wild mountain blooming. "Are you ready?"

Tosk nodded her head, straightened in her seat and closed her eyes. She imagined she was a great gray cloud, pregnant with rain, shadowing a parched field. She cleared her throat and thunder rolled across her mind. Tosk centered her focus and the cloud grew blue and black. She exhaled and let go of her storm and felt little streams seep into the

soil. Grounded in her field, she pushed her imagination out in a tunnel of bamboo. Her soul left Cullowhee and walked toward the Land.

Jagged shoots rustled as she traveled, as if she were walking in place as the Land passed her by. Budding bamboo blurred her vision, but she brushed off the dizzies. Extinguished fires lined the Valley surrounding the bamboo walkway and Tosk knew the Rock wasn't far. No part of the Land was foreign to Tosk; after her parents died she spent a dangerous amount of time in the Land. It got so bad, a couple of times Mabel couldn't find her. For a while, Tosk didn't see the point in coming back.

The tunnel closed in and sparks darted through the bamboo, fireflies flit and lit a silk line above Tosk's head parallel to the tunnel. She sprinted and called out Tim's name.

He set a heel in a groove carved in the Rock and jammed the toe of his other shoe into a nook. The Rock got bigger as you climbed it, revealing it's true size long after you climbed too far up to jump down. Huge scars decorated the rock side; slant-eyed giant-sized glyphs that told Judaculla's tale. The web waved above Tim's head, willing him ever higher.

Just as he felt for a finger hold, he heard a restless wind. It yanked his attention from the web and prickled his inner ear. The wind whipped up again and he thought he heard his name. He looked down and slipped; he was eye level with the hemlocks- much higher than he thought. He looked back up at the silver web wisp and forgot which way he was going.

The wind rushed up again and this time he was sure he heard his name. He looked down again and saw someone running. Too dark to see a face, Tim let one hand go of the Rock and leaned out to stretch his eyes.

“Tim!” shrieked through his ears a third time. “Look out!” The puddle-sized person waved small hands. He glanced up and his other fingers slipped.

Spider crowned the Rock, her legs crooked up in a circle around the top. She leaned down and the flame in her tusti bowl danced. The Rock looked like the face of a mountain king with one eye burning.

Tim clawed the Rock, but flailed and fell. He screamed as he plummeted, palms catching air that wouldn’t help. Tosk flew forward fast enough for Tim to land hard down on her. The force of the fall threw them both back into their bodies and Tim shot up and smacked his head into Tosk’s, and fell back into her lap.

Tosk rubbed her head as Mabel got up to fuss. “I found him,” Tosk said.

“Tim? Timothy? Are you okay?” Mabel said, bent down, pressing her palm against his forehead like she was feeling for a fever. She grabbed his jaw and turned his head right and left, and Tim snapped, slapping Mabel away and jumping out of Tosk’s lap. He crouched up on the couch like a squirrel. He twitched and rubbed his face and said, “Who the hell are you?”

“Grateful little shit, aren’t you?” Tosk said. “You must be Leeney’s.”

“Baby, go make some coffee,” Mabel instructed Tosk, while she stood and lit a cigarillo. “He’s in shock.”

“And what about me? I’m not in shock?” Tosk snarked.

“No,” Mabel replied, “You don’t shock.”

“Well,” Tosk said, rising, “I can’t argue there. I’ll grab us some Ibuprofen, too. He’s gonna go migraine soon.”

“Good idea.”

“Who are you people?” Tim screamed. “Did you kidnap me?”

“Tim, honey. Calm down. It’s okay,” Mabel began. “We’re your family. Your other family. I’m Mabel,” she paused and offered him her clove. “Here, smoke this. It’ll help you land.”

CHAPTER SIX: BUT SOMETIMES SHARDS

The sun didn't want to rise. Light and warmth spread best when it shattered the night, but the Shivers scared the sun. As it peered over the ridge, the smoke bunched up around the mountains' shoulders and threatened to leak down and chill light into shadow.

Loose as the rules were in the Land, the sun couldn't up and play hooky. So, it tiptoed over the peaks real quiet and tried not to illuminate. Still, there was no way to obscure the Shivers' damage. Boar and Black Bear lay dead in the Valley. Vulture wouldn't even peck their eyes. Snail stuck frozen to the Rock's side. The sun figured Judaculla must be dead. No one in the Valley had seen him in a while, but that was common. All of the Plott Balsam ridges were his and he regularly stalked for seasons at a time.

He'd never been gone this long before- long enough for Totems to die and the Shivers to take the Land. The sun slid behind a cloud and tried not to make shadows.

Tim ran his hand across his mouth and stared at the blue and white stripes on the shirt Tosk loaned him. He hadn't said anything since Mabel stopped yammering almost an hour ago. The ladies leaned on the kitchen counter and drank coffee and waited. They took turns ashing a clove and staring in the living room. Tosk played Angry Birds on her Droid.

"I screwed it all to hell," Mabel began. "I shouldn't have said all that at once at him."

“He’s a big boy, besides it’s not like there’s any turning back now.” Tosk took a puff and passed the cigarillo to Mabel.

“No. But still, he’s too young.” She threw her hand at Tosk and said, “You’re all too damn young.”

“Oh, Buck and Leeney are as old as they’ll ever be and I don’t count. He’s the only one at risk of a complete meltdown.”

Mabel snatched Tosk’s phone, “Ass.”

“Look,” she replied, “he’ll be fine. He just needs a minute to adjust.”

Mabel looked outside the kitchen window and replied, “Honey, I’m not sure we have time for him to adjust.”

“He’ll be fine. He just needs coffee. Watch,” Tosk ended and grabbed a to-go mug. She fixed her infamous faerie coffee: ½ coffee, ½ milk, and seven heaping spoonfuls of sugar. She walked into the living room, and said, “You gonna freak out if I come near you?”

Tim looked at Tosk. He saw a smart mouth and bright eyes. The last few hours made Tim feel raw and sore; his throat winced as the words left it, “Maybe.”

She snickered, and approached Mabel’s grandson. Tosk could see his birth father, Jimmy Easley, in Tim’s jaw and nose. Jimmy was before Tosk was a part of the family, but Mabel kept pictures of him in the album. Even though they buried him out in Webster, the three women still put flowers on his grave at Christmas. When they told Tim that Jimmy was dead, the boy seemed relieved.

“Here,” she said, passing the to-go mug. “You feeling any better?”

Tim shrugged and said, “Am I supposed to?”

“No. Not for a while, I bet.” Tosk said. “Did any of that make sense?”

He paused. He’d never talked about the Land with anyone before. No one he knew seemed like they would believe him. But Tosk and Mabel, they knew the Land- they found him and saved him. He didn’t know what to say, so he said, “Um. Yeah, actually. More than you know.”

“What’s that mean, baby?” Mabel asked, walking in.

“I... that wasn’t my first time in the Land,” he admitted. “I didn’t think anyone else knew about it. It was always just this place I went to sometimes in my head- in my dreams. I’ve never just gone, like y’all can. But I’ve always wanted to.”

“How old were you when you first dreamt there?” Mabel asked.

“Uh. I don’t know. I was a kid. Eight? Ten, maybe?”

Tosk smiled and said, “Nice.”

Tim’s heart spun.

“So you’ve never gone on your own, while you were awake?” Mabel started again.

“No.”

“Have you ever tried?” his grandmother asked.

Tim hesitated; he didn't want to tell the truth. He had tried. He'd tried a lot but never got there. He looked at Tosk but looked down at the afghan and said, "Yeah, but. It never happened."

"Thank the Lord for small blessings," Mabel sighed and sat down. She glanced at Tosk and said, "Dreaming there is bad enough, but going there without knowing how to shield or navigate is dangerous," she said turning back to Tim, "And irresponsible."

"Oh," he replied, head still down.

"Mabel, you're gonna terrify him before he has any fun. Come on, Tim," she said grabbing her keys. "I need to get back to the office and you should get back to the dorm."

"Actually, my car is over by East LaPorte. I parked it there to run."

"Right on. Let's go."

Mabel stood and wanted to rush over and hug him, but fought the urge. Tim looked at the coffee mug and then at Mabel and then at Tosk.

"Um. Thanks," he said and followed Tosk out.

The percolator gurgled and steamed on Leeney's counter top. Buck was splayed out on her couch: one leg slung up on the side, one leg sprawled on the floor, and one testicle popped out of Goodwill boxer shorts. His mouth flapped open like a flytrap and his hands were swollen. His gun popped out of its holster when he kicked off his pants and it laid a couple of inches from his belt. The man could not hold his weed. Leeney

wondered how he remained employed. Most everyone had some kind of darkness they hid. Drugs, alcohol, medication, whatever- people did what they did in order to keep the shadows locked up tight in their souls. Buck just didn't care, though. He didn't know mercy, so he never learned how to let it in. He smoked and drank not because he was escaping the darkness, but because it was his kin.

Leeney poured her coffee and thought about the afternoon. She felt like road kill. She'd only slept for about two hours and didn't want to face her mama or son, or go do Mr. Shelton. Whores don't get days off, Grandma Parker used to say and she was right. Unless you were oozing from some orifice, a man didn't care. While Leeney was one of the highest earning citizens in the small college town, she couldn't afford to lose any clients. Times were tough, and she refused to lose the life she earned.

She poured her cup and sighed. She knew she reached the end of running from Mabel and Tim. She figured she'd finish getting ready and leave Buck to sleep.

Tosk's Subaru slid down Tilley Creek between mottled leaf shadows. She glanced sideways at Tim every so often, but he just stared out the passenger window and sipped.

When they got to the light at 107, Tosk took a right and tried to think of something to say. As much as Tosk wanted to leave Tim to his thoughts, she wanted to keep him talking to make sure he was real. Mabel was beside herself when she read that letter. She'd talked about the baby Leeney gave up for adoption, but Tosk didn't realize how much Mabel wanted the boy in her life until Tosk watched her read the letter and came alive. Blush flooded her cheeks like rouge and her lips glistened. Youth sparked her

blood and she glowed like a mama cow that survived the birth. Tosk knew if he slipped away from Mabel again, she'd remind the mountains an ice storm was a mild breeze compared to Mother Parker.

They passed wildflower patches tended by the county and as the road bent around the Tuck's bank, Tosk said, "You do realize you're expected at Sunday Dinner now?"

"I have time trials this Sunday," he replied.

She quirked her brow and snorted.

"Yeah. It's lame. I know," Tim said and almost smiled.

"Well, figure a way to get that done early. We've got a lot of catching up to do, and I don't mean that in the Lifetime Movie kind of way."

Tim chuckled and Tosk let out a laugh, too.

"Seriously. There's a lot you don't know," she paused, tasting the foot she'd just shoved in her mouth. "I meant about us. And logistics. And Leeney."

He looked for the river rocks deep under current and croaked, "Yeah. I know."

"Take the day, play video games, and try to sleep," she ended, pulling into the parking lot at the East LaPorte River Park.

Tim said, "Thanks," put down the cup and got out of the car.

"I'll text you about Sunday."

"My phone doesn't text."

Tosk blinked twice and said, “Wow. You’ve shocked me, Tim. Someone has actually shocked me. Well done. And Seriously? It doesn’t text? How is that possible? Jesus. Just meet me here. Sunday. Four o’clock. Got it?”

“Sure,” Tim said and shut the door and walked to his car.

Tosk pulled out of the parking lot and slid into summer haze. Tim did the same.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ARE THE ONLY THINGS

The flame spat a spark when the wick lit. It floundered under Mabel's breath but stabilized. She wanted a red candle, but she only had a box of white tapers, and white would do. She figured Leeney would take her sweet time getting to the house- maybe even go do Mr. Shelton first. That meant Mabel had a little time to walk the Land and see what happened. If the boy really did rip through like Buck said, they were all in trouble. Mabel knew Spider stalked in Cullowhee. She'd felt the Totem scuttering and Leeney'd even hit one of Spider's lines, though the fool girl would never admit it.

If Tim could rip through a soft spot, though, she- well, she didn't know exactly what it meant and not knowing made it worse.

She sat on the floor in front of a simple altar. Palm-sized river rocks circled a tarnished candleholder as pine needles and peat moss dusted Grandma Parker's laundry stool. Its red wood legs leaned to the left on old bolts. Mabel didn't bother with songs or chants or funny dances. She didn't call on any guides or invoke any servants or spirits or Saints. Mabel's magic was like a bald mountain face, plain in composite but exotic. Undeniable. She spoke directly with the ridges and could tease rain from the sky. People who didn't know better called her a witch and it made her giggle. Moonlight reflected off her skin and tree roots tickled her feet. Cheap words could not contain her.

She closed her eyes and settled, her body still as stone. She imagined her legs sunk deep in the earth, like a boulder half buried in a hill, and wound up spare thoughts in a ball of yarn. Once she was grounded, she remembered the smell of the Land's soil and the rush from the gust of Crow's wings. She recalled the first time she Walked. Her

mother waited until Mabel was twenty years old to take her across the River to the Land. Grandma Parker always spun stories about the Land when Mabel was a child, but she didn't show her daughter the way in until Mabel took over the family profession.

"We're bound here," Mabel's mother said. "Bound to the Land. A long time ago, when we first settled in Cullowhee, a Parker pissed off Judaculla. Back then, Cullowhee was Cherokee land and our family squatted on a piece up in Little Canada. One of our boys was out hunting deep in the balsams and shot a Totem. He didn't know the deer was a Totem, but not knowing don't matter to the mountains."

"How did he shoot a Totem?" Mabel recalled asking her mother. "I thought Totems lived in the Land."

"They do, baby. But they can cross over just as easy as we can. Nothing that big and powerful has to stay in one place."

"Except for Spider."

"That's the bargain," her mother replied.

Her mother's words hung in Mabel's mind and she focused her attention on the last two: the bargain. The Parkers swore that they would love the least of Judaculla's flock. If they ever denied their charge, Judaculla's Spider would take a Parker's soul- and that's exactly what Mabel feared was going on. She had a bad feeling when Leeney gave Tim away, but she knew it wasn't her place to live her daughter's life. When nothing happened immediately, and then at all, Mabel figured her bad feeling was just her feeling bad, and let go.

When the Land went cold, though, and Tim's letter came, the bad feeling came back and her mind couldn't un-stick the thought that the ravens had come home to brood. Mabel hedged against visiting the Courthouse, but when Boomer showed up with that nasty bite, she knew she had to take a walk.

Mabel always crossed into the Land at the River. She imagined she was a boulder at its edge. She heard water gurgle like a baby and felt it splash on her hard face. She imagined shoulders and knees growing up and out and Kudzu springing as hair. Mabel stood and saw her reflection in the River: all rock, but no statue. With slate and quartz skin, she was a woman of stone and pebble. She stepped into the River, the water hitting mid-ankle. In the Land, Mabel was long and curved, like the Tuckaseigee, and her eyes glinted grass and pine and ivy. She walked up the River, against the current to the Courthouse.

Leeney changed her mind and reckoned she'd take care of Mr. Shelton before going over to her mama's. Best to get a nasty thing done with, her grandmother used to say- and he was certainly that. Mr. Shelton was a rotten, bent old thing that dripped and stank. He was mean and selfish and Leeney was sure he got off treating them like hogs. She struggled to find the Christian charity necessary for Mr. Shelton despite the fact her momma raised her to care in a way nobody else could.

The old man wasn't who curdled her fortitude however; it was Mrs. Shelton. She was there deep in every grain of wood like mold: inescapable and sickening. Haunted was too light a word; Mrs. Shelton owned that house. She possessed it. She whispered

through pipes and creaked down stairs. She clicked tight locks and occupied the air. Mrs. Shelton supervised everything through a photograph.

Big Blue climbed Shelton Road from paved to dirt and Leeney shivered thinking about that picture. It was taken at Cullowhee Baptist where Mrs. Shelton taught Sunday school forever ago and it stayed up on the mantle. Mrs. Shelton's claw gripped her husband's shoulder and her smile couldn't reach her eyes. Like a duchess who lost favor, she held what was hers.

Leeney first noticed the photograph not long after the funeral. She was eleven years old and went with her mama to see Mr. Shelton. She wasn't in the house three minutes before she felt caged, like someone was watching her. She sat on the couch across the mantle and made believe she was marble. It was so quiet her heartbeat echoed. Something huge and forbidding pressed on Leeney and she held her breath against it. She didn't dare sneeze or cough and prayed her mama would hurry.

She made the mistake of looking above the fireplace and locked eyes with Mrs. Shelton. Leeney's stomach lurched and trembled. It took all her power to stay in her skin and she clutched the cushion to stay put. The dead woman wormed in the little girl's soul and inspected. She slithered though everything Leeney kept quiet.

Now, the driveway was jagged, more rut than gravel and branches hung heavy, scratching the top of Leeney's truck. The sun was up over the ridge and the wet mountain heat had kicked up. Leeney cut the engine and attempted to focus but couldn't. She knew Mrs. Shelton waited.

Leeney opened the screen door to the porch and saw the front door was cracked. She pushed it open and the smell of sour beer singed her nose. Weeks worth of recycling barricaded the stairs, a sign their son was mad at his father. The TV played a Wheel of Fortune re-run, while Mr. Shelton ignored her.

The house felt different. Something was off. The air was thick, but it didn't suffocate. Nothing pressed or paid attention. Leeney didn't know what to make of it. Mr. Shelton muted the volume as Leeney approached and she waited for his usual insults but none came. He didn't even look at her. He just stood and pulled down his pants.

Her knees popped as she got down. Her mama always said knees were the first to go. Shelton refused to take pills and was born before the Lord was, so he took a minute to get going. He flinched as her cold hands worked him and Leeney got ready for Mrs. Shelton. She could always feel the dead woman in the back of her skull, watching, making sure Leeney did everything right. She waited but nothing happened. Leeney looked around, like she expected to see Mrs. Shelton standing in the doorway to the kitchen, or over by the stairs. She wasn't anywhere.

Leeney's lips and tongue took flesh and she winced; he had not washed. He grunted softly and never touched her. He only swayed if she made him.

She took a break to use her hands, wiping her chin on her shirtsleeve. The reflection of the TV in broken glass caught her eye and Leeney saw the photograph, not on the mantle, but on the end table next to the couch. She clamped her eyes quick and caught her breath, but the dead woman stayed where she was. Leeney opened her eyes to the picture. The glass cracked across Mrs. Shelton's grip and her eyes were empty.

Shelton's breath quickened and his stomach clinched. Leeney looked up after he pooled in the webbing between her fingers and saw him blink out a tear.

Leeney let go and walked to the bathroom, closed the door, washed her hands and face, and brushed her teeth. She stared in the mirror until she heard his bedroom door shut. She walked back out to the silent television and saw her momma's clean casserole dish on the end table with a check inside. The photograph was gone and Leeney's gut said to check on him, but ignored it and left.

A huge oak cast its shadow on graves with names repeating like laundry. Tim sat far out in a cluster of Unknown gravestones laid flat on the soil so you didn't notice the missing names. The sun stretched out above the tight ridge like it was too big to fit back behind them. Tim looked from the tombstones, to the parking lot, and to the back of library. Judging by the cars parked in the lot, it was after five, which meant the team would be walking over to the dining hall.

The walk back over from the graveyard would take about ten minutes. He knew he had to go meet up, but his legs refused to meet him halfway. He just didn't care. The Spider from his dreams was real. His dreams were real. How could he care about anything when he finally had what he wanted all his life? As real as the Land made him feel, he'd never heard anyone talk about it. His parents didn't tell him about it, his friends didn't take him there- it was something that happened only to him.

The Spider still shook him. The look on Mabel's face when Tosk said Spider saw them was the same look his mother had when dad had a heart attack. He came out fine,

but for three days, Tim's mom was terrified. But Tim's fear now was a thrill because the Land was real: really, real. So real other people knew about it. All he wanted to do was romp. He wanted to tear through the Land and run the peaks and dig coves. He wanted to uproot trees and diverge streams and drink the blue from the sky. He wanted to dance and make the land slide.

The thought of eating under florescent lights acting like he liked it dissolved his smile.

So he stayed in the graveyard and wished he could snack on the tree roots, like piecrusts.

The River starts and ends at the Waterfall and above the Waterfall lays Judaculla's Courthouse. Back in Cullowhee, if you tried to find the Courthouse, you'd fail. Now, you could find Devil's Courthouse on a map- you can even take a trail to it, but you'll never arrive where the Cherokee said Judaculla lives. "You can't find everywhere," Mabel told Leeney when she was a teenager. Leeney didn't learn how to walk too well, but she could find a soft spot no one else could sense. She'd learned to slip through okay enough, but wasn't always who you wanted with you once you started walking. You tended to have to keep her steady.

Mabel could walk with the best of them, though, and her boulder thighs crawled up the side of the Waterfall and reached the Courthouse in good time. A flat rock face held vines that wove a thorny tapestry to hide the entrance. The sun nested up in high clouds, but peeped through their folds and watched Mabel. She approached the thicket

and crouched down to where the vines made root. She grabbed a chunk of vine and ripped up, snapping them like a bullwhip. The sun shined on the cave's opening and as Mabel strode in, it wilted behind the clouds.

Burnt branch and ash showed where Judaculla's fire used to be. Tattered silk strings hung broken and covered in dust. The Courthouse felt like an abandoned barn on a second-homer's property: protected from entry because someone owned it, not because someone was there. Mabel worried the only reason Spider was free was because Leeney broke their pact. She just didn't know which one of them Spider was after.

She walked outside the cave and stood at the edge of the Waterfall. She could see the Valley spilled out before her, herded in by the Shivers rippling down the ridges. Chill trilled up Mabel's legs, begging her to shiver, but the granite woman refused. The sun came back out from its shelter and a tiny shimmer below caught Mabel's eye. To the right, down in the Valley, silk threads waved at Mabel. Spider crouched behind the Rock.

Mabel sighed, caught water in her rocky hands, and drank before going down.

CHAPTER EIGHT: WORTH CARRYING

Spider secured the edges of her web and skittered back up the Rock. She could see nearly all of the Land, except the Courthouse and the Waterfall, and the Coves that belong to the Shivers. If you were Crow and flew from the Rock to the Coves, you'd fly two or three miles southwest, past the peaks and down into dry hollows the sun won't touch. At night, the Shivers snuck up over the ridges, gliding down like fog. When they passed through, the Valley shook and seized. Totems couldn't scream or breathe. The Shivers froze every muscle and bled your bones cold. When they left, heat dissolved into their fold. Without Judaculla, the Shivers were free to take what they pleased.

Tim squinted against the sun as he walked past Bob's and down to the courtyard where the team corralled to eat. He hadn't figured out how he was going to stay in school and quit the track team, but he reckoned he'd quit anyway even if it meant he had to drop out. When Tosk told him to think of a way out of time trials, all he could think of was quitting. Well, that and her eyes. Shimmering river silt was nothing compared to her light brown pools. When Mabel told him about the Land, he zoned out at familiar parts and got lost in Tosk. He could tell she'd never call herself beautiful and something hard sat inside her, but she captured him. Cropped hair black as the new moon and skin white like when it's fat and full, he saw the wild in her smile and wanted it to shine on him.

He rounded the corner at Breese Gym and saw Coach's back a few feet in front. Tim heart jumped up into his throat and he ducked his head and pulled on his hood. There'd be hell to pay when Coach saw him, especially when Tim couldn't explain why

he ditched buddy run that morning or where he was all day. Mabel told him, “This ain’t something you can talk about. Regular folks can’t understand the Land without knowing its pull. They don’t yearn like we do; they’re souls aren’t yanked around by the wind. It puts a wall between you and everyone that’s never been.”

“But you get to live a secret, double life. And that’s pretty awesome,” he remembered Tosk saying with a wink.

“Yeah,” he heard Mabel say, “Like a damn spy.”

Sheriff Buchanan got the call that afternoon. Shelton’s son, Morris, finally came round to see about his daddy and found the old man with half his face shot off. He was still alive when Morris called 9-11 and when the university paramedics and Cullowhee Fire and Rescue arrived. Buck pulled in shortly after, careful not to block the ambulance. Morris was real quiet; he stood outside by a tree and dipped, syrupy spittle trailed down his chin.

Buck walked up and removed his hat. “Morris, you know I got to ask you some questions, son,” he said as if they didn’t graduate together.

“Yep,” Morris said and spat.

“You think he shot himself?” the sheriff asked.

“Oh, I know he did.”

“He leave a note?”

“Naw. He could barely see.”

“So you think it was an accident?”

Morris snerked and said, “Nuh-uh. He meant it.”

Buck paused and watched the EMS workers lift Shelton over the pebbly driveway and into the van. Buck thought he looked like a sick puppet, withered and suckling on IV strings. Morris spat tar juice and shook his head.

“You don’t seem too bothered, Morris,” Buchanan noted.

Shelton’s kid shrugged and said, “Guess I’m a bad son.”

Buck felt anger rise off the man. It started in Morris’ pit and boiled up, staining his throat red. Everyone knew how hateful old man Shelton was, and that Morris took care of him more out of obligation than love, but Buck didn’t appreciate Morris’ reaction. When your daddy tries to kill himself and fails, he thought a son should have compassion, and Morris didn’t have any. He wasn’t angry because his dad tried, but because he didn’t succeed. If Shelton’s hands had been steady, his son would be relieved.

“I’m going to go have a look inside,” the sheriff finally said.

“Do what you like. That’s what you do,” Morris replied.

“And just what in the hell is that supposed to mean, son?”

“Son, my ass.”

“Look, Morris,” Buck said changing tactics, “I know how you must feel.”

“You don’t know shit,” Morris cut him off. “If you knew anything, you’d keep that whore of yours locked up. She’s who did this.”

Buck quirked up his face and said, “Leeney? But you said he shot himself.”

“You’re one dumb son of a bitch, Buck. She don’t have to pull the trigger to be responsible.”

“Care to elaborate so this dumb son of a bitch gets your meaning?”

“She taints what she touches. Look in the mirror and you’d see that.”

The EMS pulled out the driveway and flashed its sirens on. Buck figured it’d be about an hour into Asheville. Lord knows Sylva’s medical only could’ve prayed. Of course, he thought, after riding an hour with half your face blown off, praying might be all anyone could do.

“Like I said, you do what you want, sheriff. I’m going home,” Morris ended and walked away. Buck let him get into his truck, pull out, and turn left up the road home.

Buck took out his phone and dialed Leeney.

“Uh, Sheriff?” a volunteer rescuer interrupted.

“Yeah?”

“The boys thought you should know. Shelton had a bite. Like Boomer did.”

“Where?”

“On his shoulder.”

Buck paused, but then asked, “It look the same?”

“Yes sir.”

“Right. Thanks,” he replied and then said into the phone, “Leeney?”

Mabel heard Big Blue ease up the driveway and anxiety rippled down her spine. She wanted to pop Leeney upside the head and then drag her by the ear, and tie her to the space heater so she couldn’t leave. However, she knew that if she came roaring into Leeney, the girl would punch and run. As tough as Leeney thought she was, her family treated her gentle, like an old stick of dynamite bound to go off. Besides, this wasn’t about Mabel, and she knew that. This was about Tim, and always had been.

Leeney opened the door, holding her mama’s mail in one hand. Mabel lit a clove and waited their fight to begin, but her daughter walked in and said, “They think Shelton’s in a coma.”

“What? When?”

“Just now. Buck called. He said Shelton tried to shoot himself and missed.”

“Bless,” Mabel said and took a drag. “Shot himself. I can’t believe.”

“I was just over there to see about him. Something was wrong, but I didn’t know. I thought,” she ended trailing off.

“Baby, you couldn’t have known.”

“No, but you would have,” Leeney replied.

“We don’t know that. Did Buck say anything else?”

“No, but there was something else. That much I could tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was like he didn’t want to tell me something, but he needed to. Like something else happened, but he didn’t want to say just then.”

“Well, maybe he couldn’t talk much about it. I doubt he was alone up at Shelton’s house.”

“Maybe,” Leeney said and realized she was still holding her mama’s mail. She put it down and walked into the kitchen to grab a drink. Mabel shuffled through the mail and found a fancy ivory envelope with her name and address in calligraphy.

“Oh Lord, who is this?” Mabel said and tore open the invitation. She scanned the swirled script and lit like a Roman candle. “Oh,” she said but fizzed. “It’s for Boomer and Jayme. She must’ve mailed them just before,” Mabel stopped, cutting herself off.

Unspoken words jittered in the air between them.

“I can’t believe he shot himself,” Leeney finally said.

“I can’t believe you stood up your own son,” Mabel said, sucking her clove.

“He’s not my damn son,” she spat and looked out the window, twilight came early to her mama’s north side land. A lone firefly tested the air.

“And you missed him again. Tosk took him back already.”

“Ah. I thought maybe they were outside.”

“You’re a shitty liar, baby. Always have been.”

Leeney looked at her mama and then stole a cigarillo. The fire ignited her eyes and Mabel wished Irene were still alive. That woman could talk sense into Leeney.

“So what’s he like?” Leeney finally said to break the silence.

Mabel smiled and took a drag. The blue smoke tasted like sugar on her tongue. She licked her lips and said, “He’s just like you. But nicer.”

Leeney snorted and said, “Then you sure he’s mine?”

Mabel gave half a chuckle and then stared long, taking in everything and nothing. “Oh, he’s yours alright.” Then she got up and locked the front door and closed the windows. Then she came back out to the kitchen, where Leeney was already making coffee without being asked. Mabel lit the table candles and sat back down with her daughter.

“Now, baby,” she began, “I want you to just listen. Okay? Just listen right now.”

Leeney shored up her shoulders and looked down at the burning clove cigars. She breathed out hard and said, “Buck told me everything already, but all right.”

“Buck doesn’t know every little thing,” Mabel replied.

Tim wasn't hungry, but he filled his plate with oily pizza and "like chicken" nuggets, all the time keeping an eye on Coach. Tim waited for everyone to sit down, and then took a deep breath and sat.

"Oh look, you're alive," Coach said. "Let's hold a parade."

Tim dipped a nugget and coughed it down.

"You don't have anything to say for yourself?" Coach nagged again.

"I won't be at trials on Sunday."

"And just where will you be instead?" Coach snorted.

Tim paused, but said, "At dinner."

"Come again?"

"I, uh. I have a date," Tim replied hoping that wasn't entirely a lie.

"Sammy taking you back? That might be all right. You acted normal when you were with her."

"No," Tim chuckled. "She's nothing like Samantha."

"Uh-huh. Well I'm sure this girl that's nothing-like-Samantha wants you to keep your scholarship. Change it to brunch," Coach said, ending the debate.

Tim picked up his pizza, snorted, slapped it back down, grabbed his plate and walked away.

He didn't go back to the dorm later that night. He showered and changed clothes in the field house. He wasn't really in the mood for his Catamount sweats, but he figured he might as well enjoy them while he could. He went to the library, read a few magazines, and hid in a study room, and waited until the building closed. Then, Tim skulked off to a corner, curled up on a couch, and fell asleep thinking about Tosk.

Tosk didn't know if he would show or not on Sunday. Tim had a lot laid on his heart and despite her faith, she was surprised to hear his Ford Focus pull up Mabel's driveway and her glee ballooned when she opened the door and he smiled like he wanted to see her. It surprised her even more how wide she smiled back.

"Well hey there, sunshine," she said walking out to meet him.

"Hey there, stormy night," he replied.

She chuckled a, "Nice."

"So what's for dinner?" he asked.

"Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and cornbread."

"Damn."

"And Leeney."

"Oh," Tim said. "Right." He'd completely forgotten about his birth mother. She didn't even seem connected to the Land or Tosk or anything.

“Don’t look so excited,” Tosk said and furrowed her brow.

He asked, “Can I tell you something? Something honest?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Why not?”

“It wasn’t my idea. It was my ex’s. I didn’t want to know anything about before my parents took me in. Samantha sent the letters to Mabel and Leeney. My parents don’t even know she found y’all.”

“So, you’re single?” Tosk said and clinched her eyes and lips. She shook her head and said, “I’m sorry. That wasn’t supposed to come out of my mouth. You were saying? Something about not wanting to meet us?”

Tim blushed and stuttered, “Well, I didn’t know who I’d be meeting.”

“Good save,” she replied and walked to the door. “Don’t worry. She’ll be more terrified than you are. And Buck’ll keep her in line.”

“Oh, shit, the sheriff. Is he gonna arrest her?”

Tosk cackled so hard she fell against the door. “Sorry, Tim,” she said, calming, “But you have no idea how funny what you just said is. Even if Buck wasn’t head over heels for her, he’d lose election if he shut her down.”

“So everyone’s okay with what she does?”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far, but it’s not something everyone has a say in. You can’t ignore your duty just because some folk don’t like it. Besides, it’s good what she does. I sure as hell wouldn’t want to.”

Tosk went to turn the knob, but paused when Tim said, “Is that why she got rid of me?”

Tosk chewed her lip and said, “I’m not sure I can answer that. Leeney’s more like my cousin than my sister.”

“So how did you end up with them?”

“My parents died when I was a kid. We were rafting the Tuck and everyone fell in. The river took them, but spat me back out. Guess I tasted funny.”

“Oh, God,” Tim said, feeling like he’d stepped on a newborn chick. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean.”

Tosk opened the door and they walked in, “It’s okay, really. Shit happens and I got lucky with Mabel taking me in. I think she’s the only one who could’ve handled me.”

“That’s kind of how I feel about my mom and dad.”

Tosk snerked and said, “I guess so. Take off your shoes. I hope you are hungry; it’ll hurt Mabel if you don’t eat.”

“I’m a runner,” he said and did as he was told. “We can always eat.”

The smell of hot oil and chicken filled Tim’s lungs and his stomach growled. Mabel was in the kitchen mashing potatoes in a pot while Buck sat at the island and sipped on a Seagram’s and 7. Leeney’s cut off’s hung out the oven, her front half checking on the cornbread.

Tosk said, “Look what I found wandering outside.”

Everyone looked up and Leeney saw her son. His eyes were her eyes, his hands looked like Jimmy's. His hair parted to the left, like hers, with the same annoying cowlick. Tim looked back at Leeney; she rubbed her bicep like he did before a big race. Before she knew what she was going to say, she opened her mouth and out came, "You're beautiful."

"Oh, don't be a drama queen," Tosk said to break the awkwardness. "Is dinner ready yet?"

"Just about," Mabel said. "Why don't you two set the table?"

Tim didn't really know what to do and was glad when Tosk grabbed his arm and said, "She's talking to us."

After the family ate their full and lazed in their chairs, Buck said, "Well, I hate to break up this Rockwell moment, but we should get on with it."

"On with what?" Leeney asked.

"Showing the boy the way in," Mabel replied. "And his reflection."

"After what happened, he's gotta know," Buck added.

"Why don't y'all ever tell me anything? And he doesn't get a choice?" Leeney popped.

"Of course I do. I'm here, aren't I?" Tim snapped and Leeney shut up.

"Tim, my friend, you should have smashed through reality years ago," Tosk laughed.

Tim chuckled and replied, "Next time, I'll try not to be late."

"Well, let's do this," Buck said and drained his glass. He pushed back his chair and said, "I'll take scout, Tosk take Leeney, and Mabel, you bring him in."

"Actually, Tosk, baby, you take him in," Mabel decided.

Tosk looked at Tim and smiled. His heart fluttered and wanted to follow her anywhere.

"Fine," Leeney spat. "Let's do this."

Each person moved into the living room while Mabel lit a black and a white candle on the coffee table. Tosk sat Tim next to her on the couch while Buck settled into the recliner. Leeney and Mabel took up the floor, sitting crossed legged like twins.

"Do you know how to ground, Tim?" Mabel asked.

"I think so. Coach makes us do it before we race. I just kinda let everything sink down until I feel like I can't jump up."

"Pretty much, yeah," Tosk said.

"Good. We'll meet you by the River. Take your time," Buck said and closed his eyes.

Mabel held Leeney's hand and asked her daughter, "You ready?"

Leeney stared at Tim, squeezed her mama's hand, and closed her eyes.

Mabel smiled and said, "See y'all on the other side."

Tosk waited until the other three felt settled and asked, “Do you know where the River is?”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “That’s one of my favorite places.”

“Mine, too. We’ll ground and then walk there. Just do what feels right and if anything goes weird, I got you,” she said and took his hand. Her palm was as cool as the Tuckaseigee.

“Wait, what did she mean by seeing my reflection?” Tim asked.

“We all look different in the Land. When you look in the River, it reflects back who you are to the Land. And when you know,” she concluded, “we’ll be able to see you too.”

“Oh,” he said, a little afraid of what they might see.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered, “you can’t look worse than Leeney,” and winked.

She closed her eyes and for a minute, he wanted to kiss her, but he closed his lids as well and let his body sink. He relaxed his legs and hips and felt his shoulders release. He breathed deep and imagined melting into the earth. He felt the heft of gravity center him and he focused on the River. He imagined walking through trees, listening to the River’s babble. He sensed Tosk walking next to him, but things were shadowy still and he couldn’t see everything. He wished leaves would break so the sun could reveal the hand he held. At that thought, the path brightened and spilled out into the River bank. He turned to Tosk and realized he’d never felt breath before.

Her skin was Carolina blue, as if she was stained by the sky. Her tiny waist and bare feet made him want to snatch her up and spin her around. Spiky hair shone with obsidian shards and her lips bloomed pink like dogwoods. A slithery silver tail poked from behind her calves. He thought her smile was the half moon.

He left her side and approached the River. Just as he went to look at his reflection, he sensed other things around him. He turned to see Mabel, the rock-woman, and the sheriff who was a lynx. Holding Mabel's hand was Leeney. Plain old Leeney. Leeney just like she looked in Cullowhee. Red boots, cut off shorts, blonde hair and big boobs. Tim wanted to laugh. He couldn't say why, but he wanted to laugh at Leeney, laugh at her so hard she cried, and in the wanting he finally felt pity for the woman who got rid of him.

The lynx's ears pricked and he pounced off in the bushes. Tim turned back to the River and saw his reflection. His face was scarred and his chest stretched out like cornfields. Vines wove up from his feet and his hands were strong enough to redirect a stream. He crouched closer to the water and realized he was enormous. Huge.

A giant.

So this is what I look like, he thought. This is who I am for real.

He turned back to his new family looking up at him. Leeney stood slack jawed while Tosk's eyes shone with pride. Mabel wiped her mouth and sighed.

He bent back down and Tosk said, “We have to go.” She didn’t move her lips, but he heard her words in his pit. She led him back into the trees and he said, “Wait, how do I get out?”

“Just let go,” she said and exhaled into mist.

Tim said, “Okay,” spread his arms and fell back. He smacked onto his back and coughed loudly on the couch in Mabel’s house. He opened his eyes to Tosk laughing at him, but still holding his hand.

“Next time, we’re totally working on your exit,” she poked.

“How’re you feeling?” Mabel asked as Buck lit a cigarette. Leeney was nowhere in sight.

“Like normal. Why?” Tim replied.

“You must’ve inherited your grandmother’s legs,” Buck said and traded looks with Mabel. “Among other things.”

“What? Where’s Leeney?” Tim asked.

“Hurling,” Tosk said, “Like usual.”

“What’d you expect after feeding me all that damn chicken,” Leeney hollered from the bathroom down the hall.

Mabel turned to Tim and said, “She’s just sensitive, is all.”

“What time is it?” Buck asked.

“A little past eight,” Tosk said.

“You should probably be getting back soon,” Buck surmised, nodding at Tim.

“Why?” Tim asked a little huffier than he intended.

“Because if you don’t scatter the ashes, anyone can trace the fire,” Mabel replied.

Tosk sighed and said, “She’s right.” She let go of his hand and said, “Let’s stand and see if you’re woozy.”

Tim stood up fine and said, “Am I supposed to feel something?”

Mabel laughed and said, “Naw. Your mama’s just a pussy. Give me some sugar and get on out of here,” she ended taking her grandson into her arms. She looked at him long and a little sad, but said “I’m glad you’re here.”

She let him go and Tosk took his hand again. They walked outside and Tosk leaned on his car.

Tim opened the door, but turned and said, “So, I get to see you again, right?”

“Of course, next Sunday, silly.”

“But what about before that?”

“Ah. Well then,” she said and smiled.

Inside, Buck helped Mabel clear the table and start the dishes. Leeney lied on the couch and smoked her bat to settle her stomach.

“Do you think he realized?” Mabel asked Buck quietly.

“That he’s Judaculla? How could he? Would you?” the sheriff replied.

Mabel didn’t say anything for a minute, but finally asked, “What made you run off so fast?”

“I heard Spider rustling. I didn’t think it’d be a good time to show him anything else.”

Mabel looked back at Leeney and said, “Buck, I doubt it’ll ever be.”

CHAPTER NINE: BECAUSE EVEN THE MONSTERS

To say Tim's parents were upset about him getting kicked off the track team was like saying Cullowhee was an incestuous town- it was a bald understatement. When they found out weeks ago, his father called and tore into him and his mama flat refused to pick up the line. They couldn't believe when Coach called asking if they knew what was wrong with Tim. Coach told them the boy just dropped off the planet. He stopped showing up to practice and study time, and dodged teammates. If it were up to Tim, he wouldn't have told his parents anything, but after the university sent the Fletcher's a fat bill and Coach called them, Tim figured he had to say something.

"If you didn't want to run anymore, why didn't you tell us anything?" Tim's dad fumed.

"I don't know," Tim hedged. "I guess I thought you'd be mad," he ended, as if he were asking a question.

"And we wouldn't be mad when your Coach called to ask if you were on drugs?" his father spat back. "Are you, son. Are you on drugs?"

Tim choked back a laugh and said, "No, of course not. It's just," Tim floundered looking for an excuse his dad would buy. He knew the truth was not an option. He hadn't even told them about Leeney.

"Just what?" his dad prodded.

Right then, Tosk rolled over in her bed and nudged him, “Shut up, will you? Some of us are still hung over.” She pulled the sheets up under her bare chest and snuggled in around his legs.

Tim smiled and said, “It’s a girl, Dad.”

“Samantha? I thought y’all broke up?”

“No, this girl’s nothing like Samantha. This girl’s like no one else in the world,” Tim replied, running his hand through her black spikes.

“Ah,” his father surmised. “I see. Well I doubt this one of a kind girl wants to date some idiot who flops out of college.”

“No,” Tim gave in. “She wouldn’t.”

“Then it’s a good thing the house sold and we could pay for your dumb ass. Well,” his father paused, “what’s the girl’s name?”

“Virginia Toskov, but just call her Tosk.”

“Tosk, huh? She some sort of new age Russian hippie?”

Tim snarked and said, “No, she’s a coroner.”

“The coroner,” Tosk snipped. “I’m the coroner, mister.”

“Oh,” his father said and stopped. “Well that’s... nice.”

“I like it,” Tim said. “Actually, she just tried to call,” he lied. “She’s about to pick me up.”

“So, that’s it? Thanks for saving my ass, Dad, I’m gonna hop off now with my new coroner girlfriend?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Boy, she must sure be something. I don’t know what in the world has gotten into you. Your mama swears you’ve gone wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Dad.” Tim hesitated and then said honestly, “For this first time, things are starting to feel right.”

For about two months, things really were right. Tim and Tosk settled in together nicely and Mabel’s fussing grew on him. He even started to get used to Leeney. They hadn’t talked about why she gave him away, yet and he halfway hoped they never would. She felt more like an in-law that way and though he wanted to know, he wanted to go through the mess of finding out even less.

However, he did want to go camping with Tosk that night. In fact, that’s all he could think about while suffering through Organic Chemistry. Among other things, Tosk managed to get Tim to declare biology as his major and his grades seemed to pick up a little, despite the ridiculous amount of time the young lovers spent together. Tosk said she was a natural motivator and was able to push Tim to excel better than his Coach ever could.

“And you’ve got tits,” Leeney said as the three women gathered in the kitchen. They were drenched in all black, except for Leeney who had a toolbox red scarf. “Baby tits, but tits nonetheless. Never underestimate the power of those puppies.”

Tosk's Droid buzzed with a new text from Tim, "Can we go now? This classroom smells like feet."

Tosk laughed and said to Leeney, "My tiny spheres of influence are mighty." Then she tapped back, "LOL. Just be glad you're not going to a funeral."

"You sure this is a good idea? Y'all going out camping up Caney Fork?" Mabel asked for the tenth time that morning.

"Yes, you old nag. We'll be fine. We just want to get out and be on our own for a weekend. The leaves are gorgeous; the weather is perfect. We won't be far."

Mabel sneered and said with a twinge of hurt, "I'm not old. Don't call me that. And if you want to be alone, I'll go stay with Leeney."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

Mabel did know. She remembered what it was like running off with Leeney's daddy. He was an English professor over at Western, specialized in Poe. Mabel was already working then and the whole town twittered when the respected professor left his wife for a prostitute. She took enough small town crap by getting her degree, but when the student and professor fell in love, Cullowhee gave no quarter. Everywhere either of them went, stares and murmurs followed. Home was no refuge. She knew the need for love to grow alone, but worried the bad feeling in her belly was more than indigestion.

"Just be careful," Mabel said. "That thing still wants him."

"I know," Tosk said and thought he's mine to protect. "Besides, Buck knows where we'll be."

“Yeah, cause we can trust his drunk ass to save you,” Leeney said.

Normally Sheriff Buchanan pawned off funerals on deputies who needed overtime, but the Shelton’s and Buchanan’s went a ways back. Buck’s great granddaddy would roll in his grave if he knew Buck refused to lead the procession to Mauney’s.

The old bastard hung on longer than anyone expected. For a seventy-year old man, two months in a coma wasn’t too shabby. Mabel dragged Leeney to see him before he croaked, despite Buck telling them that Shelton’s son Morris blamed Leeney for the man’s condition.

Buck reckoned they wouldn’t show for the service, but the women would gather at the grave. In the cemetery, he’d see them standing far out, waiting for the crowd to dissipate, allowing relatives to say their peace. While the Parkers were closer to half that town than Cullowhee was to their own kin, the women were never welcomed like family. Morris wasn’t the first to blame the Parkers for the ill that befell their clients and no one liked a smart aleck coroner. As much good as the women did for Cullowhee, the town never saw fit to return the decency.

As Buck’s cruiser turned up the hill to Shelton’s grave, he saw Mabel’s powder pink Lexus and smiled. He’d never forget the fit Leeney pitched when her mother painted that car.

“It’s like she’s smoked all the sense out of her head!” Buck remembered Leeney said.

Buck directed the family and hung around until the minister started up again and then slunk back to three women in black.

“It’s good you did that,” Mabel said, nodding to the graveside and squeezing his hand.

“You did a good job, little girl. He looked nice. Peaceful,” Buck replied.

“I can’t believe they wanted an open casket,” Tosk said. “It took two days to get a face on.”

“You’re Renoir,” Leeney said and Tosk laughed.

Morris looked over at the Parkers and spat.

“So when are y’all leaving?” Buck asked.

“Soon as we leave here and I pick up Tim.”

“You’re not going to try to talk them out of it?” Mabel begged.

The sheriff looked at Leeney and said, “I’ve yet to learn how to talk a Parker in or out of anything.”

Leeney snorted and said, “Maybe you’re too dumb to learn.” She waved Buck out of the way and walked toward the grave.

“What crawled up y’all’s asses?” Tosk asked.

“He told her he loves her, again” Mabel said.

The sheriff pulled out a cigarette and lit up in reply.

“Oh for God’s sake, why the hell did you go and do that?” Tosk asked.

“She needs to get over that woman,” Buck surmised.

“Honey, you have no idea,” Mabel sighed.

Leeney took off her good black heels and rubbed her feet. She had the night off and planned to let Calgon take her away. She wasn’t nearly as worried about the kids as Mabel was. Tosk knew the Land better than anyone and Leeney figured they were going to get friendly before they got bored enough to go walking. Two kids playing doctor while out camping weren’t reason to fuss.

Buck, on the other hand, most certainly was. He’d been after her for four years, not counting all the years he tried before Irene. They grew up together, like most everybody did in Cullowhee. Even though part of her grew to love him it was only a part and she needed it to be the whole.

She walked into her bedroom, removed the rest of her clothes, and headed in to draw her bath. She finally decided she deserved a Jacuzzi tub and had it installed earlier that week. She loved it and knew Irene was laughing from the grave at her. She had tried to get Leeney to buy a whirlpool a decade ago and it was the only idea Irene ever failed at bending Leeney to.

“Our tub fits me fine,” Leeney remembered fussing at Irene.

“But it don’t fit us both,” Irene said, smile cracking out the side of her mouth.

“I bought you a hot tub,” Leeney snarked.

“And it’s all the way outside,” Irene whined.

Leeney shook her head, like a cow shaking off a fly, “You’re lucky you’re cute.”

She tore herself up thinking about Irene’s giggles. Leeney sighed and poured in the bubble bath. The soap seeped out like salad dressing: smooth and thick and cool. It hit the water and foamed, iridescent bubbles ballooning like lava. She wrapped up her hayfield hair and eased into the jasmine scented water.

Jasmine was Irene’s favorite. Her lover died five years ago and Leeney still bought the woman’s favorite bubble bath. She drank Irene’s favorite Medium Blend Community Coffee, despite preferring the 8 O’Clock brand. She put mushrooms in her spaghetti sauce, even though she just picks them out, because Irene loved it that way. Hell, the Jacuzzi was green for Irene, even though Leeney really liked the blue.

Leeney closed her eyes, nest into the bubbles and remembered the first time she met Irene at a mutual friend’s reception down in Traveler’s Rest. Irene loved weddings. That woman dragged Leeney to every wedding she could find.

Even when her cancer got bad, and they had to move Irene into hospice for constant care, she still talked about getting well enough to go to an old high school friend’s wedding.

“You’re gonna have to find me a tiny dress. Damn cancer made me lose all my curves,” Leeney could still hear Irene say.

“Baby, you never had curves, but I love you anyway.”

The kids decided to camp on private land near the creek that ran behind Judaculla Rock. Mabel nearly went nuclear when they revealed their plans; Tosk had to call Buck while he was on duty and make him swear he'd stick close by.

"You don't care they're going to be on someone's property? Ain't that against the law?" Mabel barked when she snatched Tosk's Droid out of her hands.

"It's safer than them going up to Panther Town. At least I can get to them in Little Canada."

"That's not the point," Mabel spat. "Buck, you know this is a bad idea."

"What, am I supposed to arrest them? That boy's gotta come into his own. You taught him to walk and he's got Tosk. The rock's the place for him to be. You gotta let them go or else they're gonna run away. Or be like Leeney."

Mabel slapped Tosk's Droid on the counter and the smack echoed in the cabinets.

That night, Tosk parked the Subaru just off Caney Fork, a little under the green county sign. She didn't want to spook the farmer who owned the land by parking up next to the rock. They hiked up to the left a little ways and found a little nook under a flat rock face. They pitched Tosk's tent and made a campfire in silence; Tim loved how they could share the quiet. When they were all settled, Tosk opened a few snacks and Tim rolled a joint.

They snuggled and smoked and watched leaves fall on the tent. They talked about walking, but closed their eyes and listened to the leaves instead. Tim was sure he'd found perfect, and he had- until they fell asleep.

Tim heard the scratching first, it sounded like a cat playing in a laundry basket. He rubbed his eyes and felt for Tosk, but she wasn't there. He shot straight up and looked around, but everywhere was pitch. He grabbed his cell phone and shone its light on her empty half of the tent. Tim tore the zipper and waved his cell phone around until he saw the source of scratching. Tosk was curled up, seizing, her foot spasming against the tent.

Tim's heart flew out of his mouth and he crashed quickly to his knees, "Tosk, babe? Wake up. It's me. Babe, please wake up. Jesus Christ," he ended pulling her up to his chest. He tried to dial Buck, but mountains shunned any service, and when he shone the phone back on Tosk, he saw it: two black spots oozing a web of puss.

"Oh shit," he said and looked around. Getting up through the roots and rocks and crags was hard enough at dusk. He wouldn't be able to carry her down and not risk breaking his foot and dropping her. He lifted her and put her into the tent, on her side, and closed his eyes to think what to do. He wanted to scream and cry and take her and fly, but he couldn't.

The car, he thought, if I can get her to the car, it'll be all right. So, he picked her back up and carried her down the hollow, holding his cell phone with three fingers so he could see the way. Just as they made it to the flat field, his fingers slipped and lost his phone. He shuffled her closer and crossed the drive to Tosk's car. Tim lied her down gently on the road and dug in her pockets for the keys.

He unlocked her car and put Tosk, still shivering, in the back seat. He jumped behind the wheel, turned the key, and heard a hollow click. Spindly tickles crawled up his spine. Like a Spider.

“No,” Tim said. “This is not happening.” He tried the ignition again, but the Subaru refused to turn over. He looked up to see the interior light left on. We must have hit it dragging the hiking gear out, he thought. “This is not fucking happening.”

He tried five more times before giving up the battery for dead. He looked back at Tosk, the car light illuminated her shaking face. Rage burst inside him; he knew they were screwed. So, he threw open the car door and bolted.

Buck got in his cruiser and rode out to check on the kids. He wanted to go over and see Leeney after, but he knew better than that. With the way she acted at the funeral, he figured she needed a night alone. So, he planned to assuage Mabel’s fears and then pass out in the gravel park-and-ride across from where 107 met Old Cullowhee. One time a deputy caught him sleeping the night there and asked Buck the next day if he ever slept at home.

“Naw,” he said. “All of Cullowhee is my own.”

Truth was, Leeney’s back yard was his home. He slept in her trailer when she didn’t have clients. He kept the yard and handled chores Leeney hated, like mopping floors and going to the dump. He slipped a few dollars rent in her wallet when she wasn’t looking, even though she didn’t need it.

“You’re the county sheriff,” she told him, “You barely make above poverty. Just look after the yard and keep clear when I’m working. Nothing makes a dick limp like the law.”

He didn’t have to, but he looked in on Mabel, too. He didn’t have a mother, so Mabel was the next best thing and Tosk had become his little twisted sister. He reckoned it may’ve been backward, but maybe if he acted the husband part, Leeney’d eventually back down and let him in. Besides, he liked the family. They made life make sense. He drove hoped the kids had condoms. The last thing they needed was another freak magic baby.

Tim’s legs burned. Each heel strike was fire: tiny sparks catching up shin and skin, igniting his thighs, roaring into his hips. He was running too fast for too long but he couldn’t stop. His heart pounded his ears and he was losing feeling in his hands and wrists but didn’t care. Tim never felt Caney Fork’s curves under him; he just ran the white line.

He didn’t know if Spider was chasing him but it didn’t matter whether she was or not. Tim had to get to a phone. Mabel told him not to run from anything magic but he didn’t care about the rules. He just cared about Tosk.

The white road line disappeared and Tim heard two snaps and a pop, like a tree breaking before the axe, but inside his foot. He collapsed, knee, palm and cheek grinding into gravel. He rolled over onto the grass, coughing dust, and his right side burned as breeze sighed over raw skin.

Tim sat up to spit and pain exploded in his boot. He eased back down and let it all wash over him: the pain, the breeze, the black of night. He was exhausted and wanted it all to stop, just for a second. He listened and didn't hear anything coming, but that didn't mean squat. Not everything that chases makes sound.

He knew what he had to do. It was a about mile from where he was to 107 and the Moonshine Mini Mart. They'd be closed, but they had a pay phone. Tim loosened the laces on his boot enough to tighten them up, pressing leather against joint to stabilize his ankle. He caught the sound of an F 350 coming, but couldn't tell from which way. Sound bounced off the hills and echoed in his head, and Tim held his breath until headlights flooded up the road from civilization. They illuminated the gnarled side of asphalt that caught his foot and turned it under. The white line broke there and started up again a foot behind him. If only it'd stretched a little further.

He stood carefully, but quickly, his palm burning as he planted for support. Hobbling carefully at first and then settling into a lope, Tim half ran, half dragged to the stop sign at 107. The pain made him dumb and he weaved on and off the white line, praying for shock. He figured if Spider was going to get him, she would have already, but he couldn't feel safe until he saw the light from the BP station across the highway. It was ugly and closed, but it was there, alive with light. Human. He paused, grasping the stop sign for support.

Fog from the Tuckaseigee behind the BP advanced wisps into the road. It was cold this close to the river, a cold that seeped and swallowed. Tim crossed to the station's pay phone, but the receiver was ripped out.

He limped away from the light.

CHAPTER TEN: WHO EAT AT THE SOUL

Spider wasn't disappointed this time. Catching the girl was equally as advantageous as catching Tim. He'd come for the girl- the thread that ran between the two was stronger than a waterfall. Spider tiptoed around Tosk's cocoon, stoking the fire in her tusti bowl. The fire's shadows slid up and down the Shivers. They'd taken over the Valley and swelled against the Courthouse, shy of Spider's fire. They wanted to freeze her like they did the rest of the Totems, but her tusti bowl stayed close. If she lost her flame, she'd freeze like the others.

Buck curved around 107, watching the Tuck more than the road and ran onto the 6-inch shoulder and kissed the ditch. When he looked back up, he saw a man limping in his lights about a quarter mile ahead and Buck's heart shattered. He slowed to a stop a few feet before Tim and the boy crumpled onto the cruiser's hood. He crawled over to the passenger seat and Buck pushed open the door.

"Where is she?" Buck asked, pulling back out onto 107 and clicking on his lights.

"In the car," Tim stammered. "At the rock."

"Of fucking course. I swear Mabel was right. When this is over I'm handcuffing the two of you to a radiator."

Buck hung a tight left and spun down Caney Fork to Tosk's Subaru. He got out and put Tosk in the back of the cruiser, where Tim already sat. He put Tosk's head in his lap and said, "Is she going to be okay? She's going to be okay, right?"

The sheriff turned on his siren and screeched back into town.

“Alright. Thanks, Buck,” Mabel said and hung up the phone. She closed her eyes and called Leeney, “Go start the truck. The kids are in the hospital.”

“What?”

“Tosk’s been bit. Buck found Tim running with a broken ankle down 107.”

“Shit,” Leeney replied, “I’ll come get you.”

“No, baby, you’re going to the hospital. I’m going to the Land.”

“Mama, I don’t think now’s the time...”

Mabel’s silence spread through the line and snapped Leeney shut.

“Fine,” Leeney finally spat. “I’ll call you.”

I won’t be here, Mabel thought, but didn’t answer her daughter aloud.

After they hung up, Mabel went to her altar, lit her candles, and settled down into herself. She closed her eyes and walked into the Land.

Everything was frozen. Before she felt its soil or air or heard the River run, she felt the Shivers’ chill rattle up her legs and fingertips. She couldn’t see her feet for the fog and the Shivers licked her rocky skin. Mabel sensed the Spider, but couldn’t see or feel her fire. Mabel crouched low and crawled, feeling for branches or twigs. Then, she bundled the sticks with strands of her Kudzu hair, set the sticks between her feet, and

rubbed her granite hands together to spark a flame. The twigs caught and the Shivers reared back. The bundle spat sparks as Mabel rose to her feet and gently blew the embers into flame. The fog swirled in on itself and emptied a path. She held her short torch out far and hurried down the River.

Leeney walked out of the elevator, turned right and saw the boys standing in the middle of a long hall. Buck was on his cell phone and Tim sat on the floor with one knee up and his bum ankle stretched out. He thunked his head against the wall.

“How is she?” Leeney asked.

Tim stared straight and knocked his head in reply.

Buck caught her attention and shook his head no and held up a finger to tell her to wait a minute. “Yeah. I’ll keep you posted,” Buck said into the phone. “Bye.”

“What the hell?” Leeney asked. “Is she okay?”

“They’ve got her on a slew of meds now. Antibiotics, pain killers- they can’t identify the venom.”

“The venom?”

Buck sighed, put his hands on his hips, and looked down at the floor cracks.

“Don’t be dumb, Leen.”

Tim knocked his head so hard it bounced.

“Stop that,” Leeney hissed, but Tim ignored her. “Well what the hell are we supposed to do?”

“Wait for Mabel. Where is she?” Buck said.

“She left.”

Buck closed his eyes and said, “You let her go alone?”

“And exactly how was I supposed to stop her?”

“I told you. We have to go,” Tim said and stood. “I can get us through and you know it. Come on.”

“Boy, what makes you think we can find either of them in all of that?” Buck asked.

“I know my own,” he replied and went into Tosk’s room.

“We better go with him,” Leeney said.

“We?” Buck asked. “You ain’t going anywhere. I love you, but out there you’re a disaster.”

Leeney’s nostrils flared like a bull, but she had no defense.

“Besides, we need someone who can call the nurse if something goes wrong.”

“But what about Mama?” she asked.

Buck heard the words in his chest, but refused to let them any further up. “She’ll be fine,” he said instead and walked into the hospital room.

Mabel walked pretty far into the Valley before she noticed everything was quiet. The River retained its rush, but the rest of the Land was silent. The Shivers had frozen everything and Mabel's flame was dying out. Walking through the Shivers took longer than she'd thought- the fog wasn't just thick, it was heavy. Even though it resisted the torch's fire, it clung to her heels and pressed the small of her back. The chill pulled her and each step she took sagged slower.

The fire bundle didn't warm her hands, even when it burned down to the quick. It went out but Mabel kept walking. She could see a fuzzy orange fire up ahead, but it was too dim to shine the lines and Mabel hit Spider's web.

Air sucked out her lungs and thunder crashed in her ears. She stumbled back, but the sticky web caught her and spun her around like it was alive. She thrashed the web and tried to rip it, but it only wound tighter. Her chest heaved trying to breathe in the freezing air, but each gasp stung like swallowing bees. Spider's fire loomed closer and Mabel coughed, hunching over. The sound sunk in the smoke and she fell cold.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CAN'T TAKE AWAY

"Boy, wait. I'll go with you," Buck said as Leeney locked the door behind them.

"You can't get through the smoke," Tim said. He held Tosk's hand, careful not to nudge any tubes or needles. "I can."

"Yeah, but I can follow close and maybe catch up with Mabel."

"And what's she gonna do?" Tim asked nodding at Leeney. "Watch the door?"

"Yeah," Leeney replied. "You really want to get interrupted?"

"You think you're up for the job?" Tim snarled.

"You think you wanna shut your mouth, boy?" Buck snapped.

"I'm not your boy," Tim said and closed his eyes.

No, Buck thought, you're definitely hers. He looked at Leeney who kept pawing at her phone, waiting for her mama to text.

"She'll be fine," he said and closed his eyes.

He grounded and walked into the Land to the River where the family always met. Judaculla stood in the River and the Shivers pulled back from his reflection. The lynx padded up to the bank and looked up at the giant. His eyes slanted like switchbacks and the lynx bristled. Cold swept close, stinging his paws. Judaculla strode up the River to the Courthouse with the little bobcat running beside.

The Shivers curled in and around like eddies in the sky. They nipped at the lynx's tail and he ran faster. The giant and the cat reached the Waterfall below the Courthouse and Judaculla gathered the lynx up in his sun sized hands and stepped up to his home.

The lynx could feel the tusti bowl's flames and he halfway hoped Spider had caught Mabel so at least they'd all be in the Courthouse together but when he got there, one bundle hung from a steel web. He jumped down from Judaculla's hands and the giant went to grab Tosk's cocoon.

Spider's fire gave her away as she lunged for Judaculla. He stepped back and swatted and the lynx ran back around behind her. The giant missed and Spider lunged again, catching him in the leg. It twinged, but Judaculla held his form. The Shivers swept in and the lynx pulled at the lines attaching Tosk's cocoon to the web. Spider reared to bite again, but Judaculla rushed forward, smashing her against the cave wall.

Her tusti bowl crushed and sparked. The flame caught in her tiny hairs and sprang to life, engulfing. Spider fell forward as the lynx chewed off the strands, dislodging Tosk. Judaculla rent Spider up by her legs and then tossed her down to the Valley, lighting the web. Flames sprinted down the strands spread across the Valley. The Shivers evaporated back behind the ridges. Judaculla turned to unwrap Tosk and the lynx ran to the Waterfall's edge to scan for Mabel, but the flames blocked his vision.

Judaculla unwrapped Tosk and gathered her up close to his chest. He gently propped her up on his shoulder and walked back to the Waterfall's edge. He turned and climbed down to the River, without waiting for the lynx. The moon came out overhead, finally no longer shy.

The giant nestled Tosk into the water, bending down to hold her head in his huge palm. With his other hand, he dug deep into the River, down below the current and held the silt. Up his arm swam gold and pearl and the colors spread across his chest and down his other arm and into Tosk. They filled her lungs and beat on her heart and she coughed and spat and came back to life. She opened her eyes to his slanted ones and the giant smiled.

Leeney knew her mama wasn't all right, but she couldn't leave the room. She could feel it in her pit- just behind her navel where Mabel told her they were connected. She paced around the room, looked out the window to the hall, and tried to feel anything but useless. She jumped when Tosk coughed, but flew to the bedside as Tim opened his eyes. Leeney glanced at Buck, still out.

"What happened? Is she okay?"

"She will be," Tim replied, "You should probably get a nurse, though. She hurts," he ended as Tosk opened her eyes and winced.

"What about Buck?"

Tim saw the flame in his mind spread across Spider's web and fill the sky. "He's getting Mabel. They'll be fine," he said and turned back to Tosk.

Fear squirmed in her soul and she felt sick. She ran into the bathroom and hurled.

Tim rolled his eyes, but pushed the button to call the nurse. "Let me get the door," he said and unwound their fingers. Tosk could feel his skin ten feet away.

Buck came back as Tim turned around. "You okay?"

"Fine, but we have to get to Mabel," the sheriff replied, standing and moving closer to Tosk. "You gonna make it little girl?"

"Where's Mabel?" she squeaked.

"Still out there," Leeney replied, coming back in, holding her stomach.

"You left her?" Tosk sat up fast, but fell back dizzy.

"Babe, don't move," Tim said sitting back down and taking her hand, "Don't worry. She'll be fine. Spider is dead and the Shivers fell back. She has her own fire."

"Come on, Leeney," Buck said pulling her by the arm as the nurse walked in.

"You're awake?" the nurse said, shocked. "I'll call the doctor."

"She's in pain," Tim said. "Can you fix that first?"

"Yeah, let me see," she began fussing with Tosk's machines.

"We'll call you," Buck said as they slipped out the door.

The embers reflected in the River, blending orange with black. Spider's legs splayed and her thorax was ash. The Valley was still cold, but the Shivers stayed behind the ridges. Just down below the Waterfall, the rock woman didn't move or breathe. The moon saw Mabel but didn't reflect off her skin.

Leeney unlocked Mabel's front door and they spilled into the living room. Buck called for Mabel as Leeney sprinted into her mama's room. Mabel lie slumped over on the floor; the candles on her altar were cold. Buck came into the room and knelt next to Mabel feeling for a pulse. His fingers hit black bite marks on her neck.

The wind picked up, blowing between the seams of Mabel's pebbles and she fell apart, rolling out in a stream of rock and vine and leaf.

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE HANDS THAT HOLD

The Parkers were laid to rest in a private cemetery up Tilley Creek just before the road crests and rolls down and out of Jackson County. A handful of names Leeney didn't recognize marked old stones, but she knew Grandma Parker, her husband and their two other kids- Mabel's brother and sister. Leeney's daddy was buried there and one of her cousins, along with two stillbirths. Irene was there, too, and now Mabel.

Most of the mourners had followed Buck back to Mabel's house and Leeney knew she should get over there and let everyone tell her how sorry they were. But, Leeney just stood there watching the men pour soil. She hadn't slept in two days, but swore she didn't feel tired.

She barely felt Tim's hand on her back and didn't hear him at first when he said, "Come on. We need to get back."

They listened to the dirt tuft and Tim wanted to lift boulders and build a woman sitting in a garden of gravestones. His throat burned like he swallowed hot coals.

"I'm going out over by Judaculla Rock later," Tim said. "After it's all over. I should check on some things."

"That's a good idea," she replied, a slight tear falling from her eye. "How's Tosk?"

"Pissed they wouldn't let her go. She pulled out her IV twice," he said and they both broke into chuckles.

“They gonna free that beast soon?”

“Once the fever clears. They’re worried about infection.”

The men smoothed the dirt over Mabel’s grave and Leeney looked at the man she brought into the world. “After things settle down, I want to learn how to walk.” She choked a little but said, “Mama’d want that.”

Tim cocked his brow, “And just where do you think you’re gonna be going?”

Leeney, “Anywhere. The Land’s a big world.”

The wind picked up the scent of carnations and roses, carrying it across Leeney and Tim. He looked at the funeral wreathes and remembered the sweet smell of the web burning.

“Yeah,” he replied, “but it’s a big world here, too.”

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